Chapter V

The Changing Contours

Jaishree Misra’s *Ancient Promises* (Period: 1990s)

The third phase, which starts from 1990s, witnessed rapid socio-economic and cultural changes in Kerala society. The exposure to western ideas and values, aided by liberal education, led to tremendous changes in the constitution of female subjectivity. With the inflow of Gulf money, consumerism became the hallmark of a Malayalee and it brought with it the objectification and commodification of women. The 1990s also saw the emergence of strong genderisation. Family became a site of power struggle as well as a centre for deconstructing stereotypical constructions.

By the 1990s the nuclear family becomes the norm but it fails to fulfil the emotional and psychological needs of its members. The absence of love and concern and the ‘use and throw’ attitude of the consumerist society led to an insecurity feeling among all, especially women. The 1990s also saw the rise of misogyny and this is clear from many rape cases reported across the state. The Suryanelli case (1996), in which a girl was gang-raped over a period of one month, shows the vulnerability of women and the hypocrisy of males.

The post-1990 witnessed social turmoil as well. The period also witnessed the rise of non-hegemonic male communities as well as the resistance by women to reclaim their identity on the cultural terrain of Kerala. They also found the family to be a primary agent in the subordination of women including their sexuality.

The mushrooming of English medium schools and the obsession of the Malayalees to embrace western customs and manners led to the rejection of native values and principles. The increasing importance given to ideas coming in from the
west was questioned by the custodians of native values. Often this led to an ideological warfare leading to a crisis in man-woman relationship.

Today many women are questioning the dowry system, gender stereotypes and in human caste practices, including the denial of higher education to women. They want to be recognized and given a respectable position in the family and society and when that is denied they challenge patriarchal institutions like marriage and family. Modern educated and employed women take decisions to assert their identity, thus redefining the contours of man-woman relationship.

_Ancient Promises_, published in 2000, like Arundhati Roy’s _The God of Small Things_, is set in Kerala. It is a straightforward narrative of the protagonist Janaki’s traumatic experiences in her husband’s house and its culmination in her divorce. As the blurb announces, it is “a heart rending story of love and family loyalty”. A _Buildungsroman_ in structure it maps the development of the protagonist from innocence to maturity, from crisis to self-identity, and from bondage to emancipation. Janaki, also affectionately called Janu, like a caged bird, has been forced to lead a miserable life due to the indifferent and unsympathetic attitude of her husband and his family. She breaks the shackles and conventions of the conservative society to escape the loveless union and marries her teenage heart throb. The novel is the story of a woman in search of her identity.

_Jannaki’s_ beliefs, attitudes and ways are in sharp contrast to the values and practices of her parents who consider themselves the guardians of their native Malayalee culture. So her love affair with her school friend, Arjun, is opposed tooth and nail by her parents. Her father had never liked young people falling in love and the concept of love marriages was totally alien to his culture and background. Her mother also thinks similarly and this is clear from her statement, “I never had friends like that
when I was growing up” (AP 25). Janaki’s parents, being conservative and traditional, expected their only child to toe their line.

Janaki’s parents are both victims and perpetrators of patriarchal hegemony. They sought their parents’ blessings first before doing anything. All major decisions in their life were taken by their parents. According to her mother, it is the duty of a woman to transform a man into a good husband. This highlights the fact that a woman, by her good words and deeds, can bring about changes even in a man who is selfish and arrogant. The high pedestal on which a boy or a son-in-law is placed is clear from her mother’s belief that a daughter’s/wife’s “happiness will improve if she treats her son-in-law like a king” (AP 241). These attitudes of her mother prove that she is a perpetrator of patriarchal ideology which places great value on the superiority of man and considers the position of women as secondary.

Janaki’s parents, just like Ammu’s parents in The God of Small Things, fail to accept the personality and identity of their daughter. The generation gap between Janaki and her parents makes her realise that her “world was a confusing one for them” (AP 26). Her world was an enigma to them because they were firmly rooted in the values and traditions of Kerala culture. The kind of friends and experiences Janaki’s had was violative of the ethos and values of their traditional culture. They had “strong deep foundations in the age old traditions of their ancestral soil and suffered no mixed-up priorities” (AP 26). They had their own dreams and plans for their daughter which were quite different from Janaki’s.

The failure of her parents to change with the changing times forces Janaki, at the age of eighteen, to enter into an arranged marriage with Suresh, the son of a rich Maraar family, thus abandoning her former friend Arjun because “he was the wrong age (too young), wrong community (not Malayali) and came at the wrong time (I was
too young)” (AP 26). Her father was furious on finding about her love affair and she was confined to her room. So her prospect of going to college to pursue her degree was abruptly stopped by these events. Her parents strongly felt that “college was for those girls who were serious about their studies and who didn’t waste their parents’ hopes and money” (AP 49). Janaki’s father, thus forcing her into an arranged marriage, promotes the patriarchal interests of the society. A girl or a woman has to always accept the decision of the patriarch because it is believed that clinching a suitable alliance for his daughter is considered the greatest duty of a father even if it is performed at the expense of her education and independence. Further, they are also made to believe that a good marital alliance brings better prospects for a woman than her education and employment.

In marital relationships, women are expected to make adjustments of all sorts. Janaki, though born and brought up in Delhi, has successfully imbibed the gender roles, including the religious and cultural values that are intrinsic to a Malayalee woman, and this is clear from her mother’s statement that she behaved exactly like any Kerala girl. The Maraars looked for a pretty girl from a conservative and traditional family which was not too rich because they were worried that a girl from an enormously wealthy family might turn out to be arrogant and “unable to adjust” (AP 53). Such people consider early marriages good for individuals and society as they enable women to adjust with their new families thus avoiding possible frictions.

Patriarchy forces a woman to enter into marital relations even when she is not psychologically and emotionally prepared for it. Janaki’s parents believe that they are lucky because the Maraars are wealthy people proving that the obvious consideration in fixing the marriage is wealth. Her effort to affirm her independence is met with stiff opposition. Her parents consider it less than arrogant to deny this proposal as they have
not even asked for a dowry. Her grandmother’s final wish to see her granddaughter’s marriage before she closes her eyes forced her to give up her studies, her friends and her freedom. Her mother says, “Just think how lucky you are that they haven’t objected to your having been brought up in Delhi” (AP 66). This also highlights how much the conservative Malayalee society distrusts women who are brought up and educated in metropolitan cities.

Gender stereotypes rule the roost in Cheyyat house. For a family, a woman’s primary role or duty in life is to be a wife and mother. All her other accomplishments are insignificant in comparison to this responsibility. She is reminded by her mother that she is the weaker sex. She tells her: “The reputations of families were carried on the shoulders of daughters . . .” (AP 46-47). Guided by these values, her parents forced her into a hastily arranged marriage which proved fatal to her happiness and life.

Even though Janaki did not whole heartedly support her parent’s decisions, she is conscious of the necessity of fulfilling the gender expectations of her parents. She agreed to it in order to erase all blemishes on her character as well as not to hurt the sentiments of her parents. She remarks: “I began to pay off some of the debts that had accrued against my name somewhere” (AP 68). She also wanted to prove that she has ended her “dissolute and uncaring” (AP 64) life by accepting this proposal. Janaki’s parents believed that their daughter will be safe and secure only if she enters into an arranged marriage. They also thought that Delhi was an alien place for their daughter and believed she could be successfully uprooted and replanted among her own people in Kerala. But to Janaki, “the soil I had been replanted in would be . . . hard and unyielding” (AP 95).

Janaki’s mother always took pride in her role as the wife of an accomplished man. Amma was proud of her husband’s name and rank. According to her, “All
brides cried and then stayed and loved and got loved. That was the myth that had been perpetuated by families like mine” (AP 94). Like any devoted and sincere parents, her parents too arranged ‘the best’ alliance for their daughter. “They had carefully picked the best family they could find and thought they had not just done their duty, but done it well” (AP 203). But their considerations focus more on wealth and family name than love and relationships.

Janaki’s parents lived an exemplary married life and so was the case with her maternal uncle Ramanmama. All of them consider marriage and marital relationships valuable and stand for compromises in relationships. Traditional values and native cultural practices strongly influence their decisions. They value a good marital alliance much more than education and independence for a woman. But they fail in realizing that a good marital alliance need not be an alliance only with a rich man. They also fail to change their patriarchal valus with the changing times. Thus her mother and her uncle Ramanmama, by subscribing to traditional values and practices, proved to be the agents of patriarchy.

The novel begins with the bold and stark statement of Janaki that her “marriage ended today” (AP 3). This shows the changing attitudes of modern women who are bold enough to come out of unfulfilling and painful relationships. Her dejected and crest-fallen mother wanted to believe that it was Janaki’s fate. But as events unfolded, the reader finds that more than fate, it is her husband’s insensitivity to understand a woman’s feelings and sufferings borne of patriarchal prejudices and conventions that seals the fate of her marriage.

Patriarchy uses religion or fate to carry out its hidden agenda. Marriage is considered a sacred institution and marital failure, according to patriarchal society, cannot be viewed as the result of insensitive and arbitrary decisions taken by its
custodians. Instead, they attribute it to fate or to an individual’s failure. But Janaki is unsure whether it was her mistake or somebody else’s. The insensitivity of the society to understand the genuine feelings of a woman and the failure to recognize her as an individual add to her woes. She is to hold the Vilakku (lamp) with the flame behind her before putting her right foot first on the step. This is highly suggestive of a woman’s role in a house which highlights the males’ attitude that she is the light of the house and has to remain calm and unruffled even in adverse circumstances without losing her feminine qualities. The instruction from her mother-in-law to “stay here” (AP 7) reminds one of the Lakshmana Rekha which a Hindu pativrata (one who is devoted to the duty of her husband) has to observe all through her life. Later Suresh also echoes the same attitude when he says that she has “completely strayed out of the good wife-realm” (AP 98).

The Maraar household, more than her natal family, is ridden with inhuman practices and tradition-bound customs. Misra narrates, “The house loomed out of the sticky Kerala night, a huge birth day cake in a gloomy, fly-infested bakery” (AP 6). An eerie feeling creeps into her marrow and she realizes with a shock that it is all pre-ordained. A woman’s history is written by man and at no point in time does she have the right to rewrite her life. According to her, “I don’t suppose I could have asked for even a word in the story to be taken out or rewritten” (AP 8). To Janaki, it was foolish and fruitless to think about rewriting her destiny. She says, “I’ve taken it now, I thought in sudden panic, that last irrevocable step into my new life. I’ve gone past that point at which I might yet have been able to turn back” (AP 8). Marriage is the destiny of a woman and no woman is free to turn back or withdraw from this solemn bondage.

Misra narrates the pennukaanal, the first meeting between the would-be couple. This being the first step towards marriage is given a lot of importance and significance
by both families. Women have eager expectations of these meetings. Some approach it “with tremulous dreams for the future and some with knowledge that this was in essence the end of dreaming” (AP 58). Suresh’s four conditions in selecting his wife and the pennukkanal are highly suggestive of man’s attempt to commodify women. To Janaki, her meeting with Suresh looked like an interview for a job—the job of the housewife—which lacked the warmth and interest usually found between people on such occasions.

The four conditions laid down by Suresh indicate the attitudinal changes that have taken place among the modern youth. The same attitude is found in A Video, a Fridge and a Bride when the prospective grooms look for fair-skinned ladies. According to Suresh, firstly she had to be pretty. Secondly, she had to be young so that she would adjust. Thirdly, she should speak English well so that he gets greater social acceptability. The probable communication gap later in life is highlighted by Janaki when she says, “He spoke to me in not-very-good English and I replied in not-very-good Malayalam” (AP 59). And lastly, “nothing else was too important” (AP 96). Her assimilation of gender roles prevents her from asking him any question because it would have been considered quite ‘forward’ to have asked him a lot of questions. He was more interested in knowing whether she would fit into the home maker role.

Janaki’s mother-in-law was a domineering and “forbidding figure’ (AP 79) and everything in connection with Suresh’s marriage went according to her plans. “The Maraars appeared to be taking their cue from the matriarch leading their delegation” (AP 79). This also shows that even though matriarchy came to an end with the passage of time, traditional women in Hindu families had control and authority rarely found in other communities.
Padmaja Maraar, the mother-in-law of Janaki, had some grudges towards her. Immediately after her marriage Janaki realises that she had not been “Choice Number One” (AP 96) for Padmaja Maraar. Suresh had defied his mother’s wishes to marry her and this could be one of the reasons why she never allowed Janaki to settle down comfortably in the Maraar household. She lavishes her affection and love on her daughter Sathi and Gauri and wilfully neglects her daughter-in-law.

The Maraars were more concerned with the external show of things and cared little nurturing human relationships. Even her request to meet her parents in Delhi after a long time is flatly turned down by her mother-in-law due to her husband’s birthday celebrations. Domesticity is a powerful weapon to keep women’s desire for liberation under male control. “You can’t be in Delhi when that happens! What’ll people think!” (AP 112). Again, Padmaja Maraar objects to Riya, Janaki’s mentally challenged daughter, being taken out for social functions. “I’m not having people pointing at us and pitying us, our family has always been admired in this town” (AP 133). She is also worried about her son and is afraid of what “people were going to say” (AP 167) when Janaki decides to go to Delhi to attend an interview and this proves that “family honour was obviously worth a great deal for Maraars . . .” (AP 240). Janaki’s stay in Delhi in connection with her confinement, which is longer than what a woman usually takes, forces Suresh to accuse her. According to her, “they cared more for their privileged world of swaying plaits and silk saris than for Riya” (AP 131).

Janaki’s mother, aware of this pseudo image consciousness of the Maraars, asks her daughter to wear every single chain that she has in order to prove her worth. The Maraar women wanted to impress the public with their show of gold and Misra mocks at Malayalees’ greed for gold. A bride is an ornament to be displayed at social functions but confined to the lower rungs within the family hierarchy. So they find
fault with her for her small pieces of jewellery which are nothing compared to the
horde of jewellery the Maraars have. Her small sandalwood jewellery box and
Maraars’ numerous large Maroon boxes stuffed with gold are indicative of the values
each family represents. This shows that in many families the value of women and their
acceptance are determined by the amount of money and gold brought by the daughters-
in-law.

As a woman’s house is considered to be her husband’s house, she has to
inculcate the values and practices peculiar to that family. This often demands a lot of
adjustments and sacrifices from her. This is why Suresh insists that the bride has to be
young so that she would adjust. Soon after her marriage, Padmaja Maraar reminds
Janaki to stop all unnecessary stylish and fashionable expressions like ‘pleases’ and
‘thank yous’ because she is now in Kerala and not in Delhi anymore. The members of
the family mock at her for her use of Malayalam and English, and virtually make her
silent. This, in a way, is tantamount to the denial of voice. So she was forced into
monosyllabic replies. “But speaking in English would be misconstrued as attempting
to be stylish and speaking in Malayalam had on occasion been greeted with sarcastic
laughter. I knew better off pretending to be a bashful bride” (AP 86). Delhi did not
like the Kerala in her and Kerala resented the Delhi about her. “There was always
something too Delhi about me and Kerala had not liked that much” (AP 69). She
exclaims, “Halfway children, we could have found a world-wide club of people
belonging nowhere and everywhere confused all the time by ourselves . . .” (AP 169).

As a Keralite growing up in an army family in Delhi, Janaki lived an apparently
Western lifestyle. But the values and ethos of a southern culture that lie ingrained in
her psyche prevent her from merging with Delhi ways and practices. She describes this
uncertain condition thus: “The odd thing was that Delhi had never taken me completely
to her bosom either, possessing as I always did that faint Kerala edge” (AP 169). The novel, according to Varghese Leena, “is the story of a woman who bears the brunt of displacement through marriage and tries to submit to an alien culture and finds rejected every time an earnest attempt is made. She is not tailor-made according to the ideological constructs handed down by a seemingly protective patriarchy” (86). She complains that Kerala had abysmally failed to accept one of its loyal daughters which show the failure of the conservative society to accept inevitable social and cultural changes. Despite all her efforts, she feels that she desperately failed to fit in. The crucial role played by language to make her predicament worse cannot be overlooked.

In addition to language, cultural and geographical dislocation also plays havoc in her marital life. But her main problem was getting accepted as a member of her husband’s family. For this, she had to transform herself into someone who was totally different from her actual self. On the morning of her wedding, after the make-up is completed, she looks into the mirror and sees a stranger looking back—“a proud product of Preethi’s Beauty Parlour” (AP 72). Her in-laws dress her up in a Maraar sari and Maraar jewellery and turn her into someone else. “I stood in front of them, a counterfeit Maraar, hiding Delhi insides and a very heavy heart” (AP 92). She suppresses her identity and betrays herself in order to get accepted in the alien surroundings. She is sure that however hard she tried, she “wasn’t to be one of them” (AP 109).

According to Misra, “Marriages in Kerala were never just marriages, they were alliances” (AP 66) which means that it is also a relationship between families. Janaki realises that this is not only her new family but a new family for her family as well. But her mother-in-law throws to wind such niceties and does not speak approvingly of Janaki’s mother’s profession as a school teacher.
The Maraar women’s attitude to women’s employment is strictly in tune with the patriarchal tradition and its values. Although all the Maraar women were highly educated, “careers for women were considered infra-dig” (AP 99) and they made sarcastic remarks about her mother’s ‘need’ to seek a low profile job. To them, women seek jobs to have extra money and this is quite unbecoming of a woman of a good family. Janaki thus undergoes the trauma of dislocation, homelessness and uprootedness resulting in alienation and identity crisis. So she wanted to get far away from Kerala to the place she really belongs.

The novel depicts the conflicts of the protagonist, both cultural and psychic. Hemalatha, in her article “The Trauma of Exile: Dislocation in Jaishree Misra’s Ancient Premises”, writes, “Janaki represents the second generation immigrants who are subjected to the sense of rootlessness and isolation when displaced from the familiar background . . . Janu experiences the trauma of displacement when she is replanted in the ancestral homeland” (44).

Janaki’s cultural displacement becomes painful because her familiar cultural practices and linguistic styles are subjected to her in-law’s sarcastic comments, leading to an identity crisis in her life. Hemalatha continues, “The novel is a scathing critique of the secondary, subordinate position accorded to women even in advanced matrilineal society like that of Kerala” (44). Misra raises serious questions regarding the institution of marriage where a girl, estranged from her familial circumstances, is sent to an entirely different and unfriendly atmosphere. In Janaki’s life, the process of acculturation begins on the day of the wedding reception itself: “I was helped by Sathi and an aunt who did a ‘tip-top’ job, as they put it, in making me look like someone else . . . By the time I’d worn Sathi’s jewellery and the brand new Kanjeevaram Sari that had been bought for me, I was somebody else!” (AP 92).
The sharp contrast in the values of both families makes Janaki’s life miserable and poignant. She becomes a victim of gender discrimination quite early in school where nuns would scan the students “looking for tell-tale signs of blue uniforms mingling with grey” (AP 20). The notion that one sex is superior and the other is inferior is painfully experienced by her on her marital bed: “the man next to me . . . wasn’t giving me my rightful share of sheet. The injustice of it was making my eyes smart” (AP 16-17). Suresh also does not come to the rescue of Janaki when she is being teased by her in-laws. She says, “And so I came in for a lot of what could have been construed as good-natured teasing. Except that I had the nagging feeling, it wasn’t particularly good-natured” (AP 96).

Strong patriarchal values control all areas of life in the Maraar family. Suresh’s father was concerned about making profits and promoting his business. Like a true patriarch, he remained aloof and distant. He was least concerned about family squabbles, for his interest lay only in profits. He held the patriarchal belief that “It was his role in life to provide for and protect his women folk and like other men of his generation he did that unquestioningly and he did it well” (AP 165). To him, family matters are nothing compared to his business. So he left such things to his efficient wife.

The attitude of Suresh towards his wife is strictly in line with this Maraar disposition. He fails to fulfil his duties as a husband and is least concerned about the feelings and sentiments of his wife. Janaki was shocked to find that Suresh fell into sleep without even fulfilling his marital obligations and desires on the first night of their marriage. Suresh, preoccupied with his business, does not have time even to talk to her or defend her, thus showing utter disrespect to her as an individual. To him, “Business is not like an Air Force job where you can take leave. Always things to
worry about” (AP 90), thus joining the other Maraars in ridiculing her father’s career. Business interests prevent him from sharing their experiences which, if done, could have led to a better relationship.

In a male dominant society, men are the custodians of all property including business concerns. Just like Mammachi in The God of Small Things who was made a sleeping partner by Chacko in his pickle business, Janaki was made a partner in their business and her job was to sign papers and not to question her husband’s accounts and bank balances. Such reactions would have been termed avaricious and undignified. “I was gradually beginning to see how a good upbringing was really a terribly unhelpful thing for a girl in Kerala” (AP 199). Traditional upbringing teaches a woman not to question the authority and decisions of her husband. Her role is that of a meek, submissive wife whose concern should be centered on the family, her relatives, and her children. She turns to her mother for comfort but she too is equally helpless: “I knew she was wondering … why she had failed to teach me acceptance. Wasn’t it merely arrogance to think that we could take matters into our hands? To take over the writing of our own stories?” (AP 236).

The patriarchal set-up expects a woman to be confined to her home fulfilling her wifely and motherly duties. The private space of the family is the domain of women and the public space is demarcated as the domain of men. So Janaki’s request to join Suresh on his business trip to Cochin is thwarted by him with the argument that his mother “doesn’t ever go window shopping or anything . . . It’s not the done thing here in Kerala. This is not Delhi, don’t forget” (AP 101). She is to strictly follow the practices and traditions of his patriarchal family and she too makes earnest attempts to become a part of this system. But in this process she gradually loses her self-confidence.
Family life demands of a woman complete submission of her will and negation of her identity. In conformity with this attitude, Suresh says, “Don’t be sensitive. Your problem is that you’ve been an only child. You’re obviously not used to family life” (AP 97). Suresh never cares to give her the companionship she desperately needs in a married life. According to her, “Love didn’t seem to play much of a part. I felt awkward to be kissed by a mouth that had not had very much to say to me up to that point. I tried to quell the feeling of revulsion that rose in my chest” (AP 87).

The total neglect of his wife and the failure to take up marital responsibilities led to the ruin of their marriage. Suresh tried to escape from his marital responsibilities by giving various excuses as work, business tours, company guests and the like. It is this attitude that makes him, on finding his wife pregnant, remark that he would ask Amma and Sathi to take her to Dr. Gomathy. Suresh, unable to face reality, always found the verandah a safe haven from his complaining wife, and according to Janaki, “it was one that would stand him in good stead for the rest of our life together” (AP 98).

A woman is a second class citizen whose ideas and sentiments are not valued by the male society. The Maraar men gather in the verandah for post-lunch sessions but women are not invited to such gatherings. Their brief entry was either to deliver a glass of water or announce a phone call. According to her, “Suresh didn’t need to discuss money or his business with me–for that he had his father. We didn’t need to discuss the household–for that there was his mother. Leisure time was shared with his sisters. As the knick-knack on his mantelpiece, I was looking pretty but getting very dusty indeed” (AP 101). She comes to realize that it was the Maraaars that she had married and not Suresh. His attitude reveals that he considers his wife a pretty object for male gaze and not one with any human emotions or individuality.
For a freedom loving soul, imprisonment is more painful and frightening than death. Looking at the caged birds at Sathi’s house, Janaki compares her own and her daughter’s predicament with those of the caged birds. She also compares her married life to the predicament of prisoners who are forced to serve life imprisonment. Suresh’s house is a prison where “the martyring of Janu” (AP 200) takes place. Her imprisonment at the Maraar house is so complete that an escape from it is only a dream. “‘Companionship’ was probably the last word either of us would have chosen to describe our relationship” (AP 114). She is aware that companionship and communication are the two most important pillars in building up any good relationship. But these two are totally absent in their relationship.

In contrast to Suresh, who finds in his business trips a tool to escape from his familial obligations, Janaki is not ready to run away from the realities of life and she decides to find her own ways of dealing with problems in her marital life. Even though she fails to find a living soul in the Maraar household in support of her, she decides to fight single handedly against all kinds of oppression. But any slight assertion of independence by her, even her request to travel alone to meet her grandfather, is crushed by the Maraars.

Women consider motherhood a means for self-fulfilment as well as a channel to get acceptance in a patriarchal family and society. Janaki, a victim of isolation and indictment, feels that she has “to fit in as fast as possible” (AP 99) in order to avoid giving the Maraars a chance to ridicule her. Padmaja Maraar’s love and affection for her grand children drive Janaki to think that it is better to have a child which would solve all her problems. She believes that if the child is a son instead of a girl, her position would be that of a good mother and good daughter-in-law. Suresh looked “confused” (AP 113) when she informs him of her pregnancy. Even such happy news
is received by him “with the same studied indifference he had shown to all the other facts of my life” (AP 113-14).

The child born out of this strained relationship turns out to be a mentally challenged girl with learning and speech disabilities marked by a “horrible absence of words” (AP 136). If the news of the child’s retardation sent shudders through Janaki, Suresh, as usual, remained unconcerned and unaffected. So Janaki had to face the challenges in life alone. The birth of a handicapped child places the family in a cultural dilemma. Society views parenthood positively but it views the parenthood of a handicapped child negatively. Annapurna in her book *Mentally Handicapped Children and Family Stress* writes: “For many handicapped individuals and their families the most devastating consequences of being handicapped are often not the direct physical or mental results of impairment itself, but rather the attitudes and reactions of those in the society, who are not handicapped” (4).

Janaki becomes an enlightened woman when she becomes aware that education would help her to get a job and escape the Maraar rejection. Her efforts to stand on her own feet and thus partly escape the rejection by the Maraars force her to complete her BA and MA. She admits that she “had achieved quite a lot merely through a combination of boredom and determination–a BA by the former and an MA by the latter” (AP 170). This boredom and determination again drive her to do a course in Special Education abroad whereby she could take Riya abroad and thus take a brief respite from her painful experiences. Her determination not to allow Riya to “wither and perish” (AP 132) gives her strength to fight back for the first time.

The woman who wanted to lead a life of freedom challenges not only the family but also the society. Her freedom and self-reliance make the society anxious and its anxiety can be overcome only if she is brought back into the system. Patriarchal
society dubs a woman as mad when she goes against its interests and dictates. So contrary to her expectations, Suresh unleashes a complex plot engineered by the Maraars. All the letters in connection with her admission and scholarship are taken away by the Maraars accusing her that she has obviously imagined the whole thing. She screams in horror and disbelief, and their conspiracy to prove her insane forces them to admit her at the mental patients’ wing at Trivandrum Medical College. The psychiatrist, pronouncing her as manic and suffering from delusions, drugs her into depression. Janaki firmly believes that Suresh might have made his family believe that family honour can be protected if she is presented as mad. The awful stigma of divorce can thus be avoided. A lunatic daughter-in-law is preferred to a divorcee in the family. According to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar “... in patriarchal culture, female speech and female “presumption”—that is, angry revolt against male domination—are inextricably linked and inevitably daemonic” (35).

Janaki is afraid of public censure. Society looks at her as a lucky girl married into a good family. Her plans to leave her husband and in-laws by taking away the handicapped child would be seen as a foolish act. People would brand her a “scheming, heartless and adulteress” (AP 201). She is aware of the cruelty Kerala is capable of inflicting on its helpless women. People spread rumours about Arjun’s involvement in Janaki-Suresh’s marital discord. Their “razor-sharp words aimed to sting and stab ... adulteress ... shameless ... promiscuous ... materialistic hussy ... sleeping around ... ex-lovers ...” (AP 251) sent spears into her mother’s heart.

Both the families are entrenched in patriarchal values. If Janaki’s education is cut short and she is pushed into an early marriage by her parents, Suresh and his people submit her to “interior colonization” which is “sturdier than any form of segregation, and more rigorous than class stratification ...” (Millet 199). In short, though she was
never beaten up, though nothing really terrible had happened to her, there was only “a long and constant catalogue of very small things . . . tiny insults, so small and so subtle as to be almost invisible, could not do any grave damage” (AP 110-11), it eventually eroded her self-confidence. This gradual draining away of her self-esteem is perhaps a more serious kind of psychological damage than physical violence as it undermines her identity and self-respect. But it is not just the men in the family who are responsible for this high handedness, but the women and indeed the society as a whole. Janaki thinks of seeking shelter from the Maraar fury in her house at Alleppy. But her mother and grandmother do not consider her predicament unbearable, for she was not being physically tortured or harassed. For a married woman, her own natal home becomes hostile. So her mother packed her suitcase “throwing in clothes and advice in equal measure . . .” (AP 215). They would accept her only when situations become really terrible and beyond any redemption.

Janaki recalls the emotional blackmail of her mother who asked her to remain within the system, however inhuman and oppressive it may be. Though her mother is a school teacher and her father a high-ranking official in a cosmopolitan city like Delhi, the tentacles of native Kerala had wrapped them completely. Thus her parents are not only victims of patriarchy, but also perpetuate it in the fear of incurring the wrath of gossipmongers back home. They too, like the Maraars, are much concerned about what people will think about them. Vargheese Leena writes: “Her bold confession to her mother and Ammumma on her return from Delhi and later her request for divorce to Suresh show that Janu had grown into a stage when she can strip herself of all restrictions that a tradition bound patriarchal system builds round her” (89).

The pretension of love is a tool adopted by patriarchy to bring women back to its fold. So Padmaja Maraar who was greatly troubled by the turn of events, addresses
Janaki as “Moley, Janu” (AP 240) in order to placate her and bring back their family honour. She uses this affectionate term for the first time which proves that she uses such terms in order to win her over to her side. Suresh, too, uses the same technique. He pretends that he is shocked by her demand for a divorce. He felt the need to show his shock, horror and sorrow to bring her back to his domain. Misra narrates this ploy of Suresh thus:

> Why have you not said anything before (surprise). I realize I have not been the best husband, but it’s not my fault, I have business to run (self pity). In the past few years it’s kept me too busy, but now from this year things are going to be different (hopeful). I’ll get much more time for you and Riya, we’ll be able to go on holidays together (eager), like chettan and Latha do. May even go abroad (trump card!) . . . my mother . . . she has a sharp tongue, but she means no harm . . . she missed you and Riya when you were away (she did?!). She adores you, really, just doesn’t know how to show it. And Sathi and Gauri too, they all love you (lies). (AP 217-218)

Religion and its practices are highly gendered. It is the right and duty of the son to perform beli rites. In the absence of a male issue, the grandson of the deceased can perform the rites. In his absence, the son-in-law of the deceased or his brother’s son (nephew) has the right to perform such rites. But a girl child is in no way allowed to perform such religious rites. Being the only child of her parents, Janaki performs the Puja and defiles the temple with her untimely menstruation and could not complete the rites. According to Ammumma, “a temple can never regain its sanctity after it has been debased like that . . .” (AP 213). Misra criticises the traditional and patriarchal values associated with religion which consider a woman’s body as impure. According to
Millet, the persistent feeling that woman’s sexual functions are impure can be seen in literature and myth, both in primitive and civilized societies. The stigma attached to menstruation, also called “the curse”, has a debilitating psycho-social effect on the female ego. This leads to psychosomatic, cultural and physical suffering.

The matrilineal family system was to a great extent advantageous to Nayar women, according to Janaki. But the change from the matrilineal to the patrilineal system makes her ask, “Was there no room for me in Alleppy then? What had happened to Kerala’s proud old matrilineal Nair tradition? When women ruled their homesteads with spirit and verve and got rid of the men who did not live up to their standards . . .” (AP 215). She wanted to ask her mother whether she could give her refuge in her house at Alleppey from the Maraar fury. But “the Nair Act had taken a hammer to Kerala’s matrilineal system” (AP 215). In 1956, The Hindu Succession Act came into effect by which every Nair could claim his/her right to property. The Kerala Nair Act of 1958 settled all issues that arose among the Nairs in matters of succession.

*Marumakkathayam* was marked by the supremacy of women over all matters, including finance. But the change that we find in the Maraar family and the Cheyyat house is an indicator of the changes that have been taking place in Kerala. The matrilineal system has been replaced by the patriarchal system and due to this Janaki had to return to Valapadu with Suresh. She knows that it is her parents’ house and as a daughter, she ought to belong to her husband’s house. She foolishly believes that she belonged here but she is “Paraya Dhan” (116), the treasure of her husband’s house.

Patriarchy makes use of myths to remind women the necessity of conforming to its values, the violation of which would be detrimental to their life and happiness. The myth of Kadalamma is referred to in the novel. The novel *Chemmeen* by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai is based on the Kadalamma myth. Janaki’s relationship with Arjun
tarnishes the reputation and honour of the family and she confides, "But today I’d fallen prey to the treacherous call of the high seas, to the howling beseeching wails of a greedy Kadalamma, the Goddess of the oceans” (AP 96). There is a belief among the fisherfolk in Kerala that when the fisherman goes to the high seas for a good catch to provide for his family, he has to struggle often single handedly against the high waves and currents of the sea. The waves, whales and sharks might approach the boat to destroy it. But he escapes miraculously from all these dangers because of his chaste and pure wife who was praying whole-heartedly for the safety of her husband at sea.

But in the novel Chemmen, Karuthamma, while her husband Palani is in the high seas, embraces Pareekutti, her former lover, and they stand on the sea shore for a long time. Soon Palani is caught in a whirlpool and is taken to the abode of the goddess Kadalamma. She, thus, punishes the wicked woman by destroying her husband. Janaki writes, “If Takazhi, at once the grand old man of Malayalam fiction and the grand uncle of Jaishree, was taken to task by an emergent feminist critical spirit for endorsing the taboos on ‘deviant’ female desire, Jaishree goes the whole hog and celebrates that very desire, defying the social and literary canon” (34).

Misra vehemently criticises the paradox associated with the Kerala model of development. Many women in Kerala today are products of “a kind of education churned out without the encouragement of genuine vision” (AP 173). She refers to Kerala as a state with cent per cent “literacy without liberation “(AP 173). The example of couples like Thomachen and Saramma in the novel points to this fact. At the age of twenty-seven she looks washed out and exhausted due to her work in the office during the day and work at home in the evenings. Saramma slaves all day washing clothes, cleaning the floors of her house, getting up early in the morning to cook breakfast and lunch for her husband and children. According to Janaki, “She was one of the educated
young women Kerala was so proud of, a gift of Communist thought and trade union ideals” (AP 173). She is a woman who works very hard without getting any support either from her husband or the government. Her husband’s patronizing attitude to his wife and their weekly family outings were more than enough for this submissive wife.

Every one, including a woman, values his/her freedom more than anything else. Janaki realizes that if she lives with Suresh she will get Riya and if she lives with Arjun she will get happiness. But her mother, who has been trying so far to mend her relationship with Suresh, is firm. She agrees with Janaki and refuses to send her back to Suresh because nobody knows what he would do to her in a fit of temper. While Janu was in England, Suresh returns Riya, just like Baba in The God of Small Things who sent Rahel to Ammu, with the realization that a daughter will be better off with her mother.

Suresh uses Riya, even though he is not much attached to the child, as a bait to bring Janaki back to Valapadu. He declares, “I can’t have a prostitute bring up my daughter” (AP 254) and takes Riya to Valapadu. He thinks that if Janaki’s purpose of going abroad is to find freedom on the pretext to find out better educational facilities for the child, his custody of the child would scuttle her future dreams.

Riya’s schooling at St. Thomas Nursery school comes to an abrupt end as she fails to fit in with the system. Janaki single-handedly embarks upon the duty of changing the star of Riya. Even though she was forced to take away the child for its inability to be like other children she is determined to bring changes in her daughter’s life. With no support or sympathy from Suresh, and no system of education for children with special needs nearby, she admits Riya in a school run by Sheela Kuriakose where children of different (assorted) age, size and disability are sent.
Braving all odds, Janaki offers her help to the students, partly to help Riya and to partly escape from the Maraars’ caustic jibes.

Armed with qualities like determination, stubbornness and self-assertion, Janaki not only paves way for her own happiness but opens up the same for her child away from a world where her condition evokes pity, sarcasm and unwanted and unwarranted advice. To Misra, financial independence through education would help women gain independence and freedom of thought. Janaki’s passport to the West is also her passport to freedom and independence.

In England, she realizes that “a long, journey had come to an end. I was home again, safe and dry” (AP 190). Here there is nobody to find fault with her behaviour. And she felt the years of coldness drip slowly out of her heart. Part III of the novel deals with Janaki’s liberation not only from her husband Suresh and her own family but also from restrictive and oppressive structures characteristic of a particular culture or society. She could lead a life of her own and no woman would be thought of as a “member of some strange, unfortunate breed” (AP 146).

Modern women look for love and fulfilment in marriage. Janaki wants to retain her freedom and individuality. She tells Suresh: “I’m not happy with you . . . We seem to need different things in life” (AP 217). Her decision to seek divorce is an attack on the patriarchal institution of marriage which forces a woman to subsume her identity under that of her husband.

Janaki feels that her long struggle for freedom has come to an end in the warm and intimate company of Arjun. Finally when she opts for a divorce it is not only from her husband but from his family too, thus violating the “unwritten contract” in a marriage. She narrates her relationship with Arjun thus: “If I had known such sweetness and bliss, would I have ever been able to give it up. Would I have ever been
able to put the love of my parents, my own reputation and the honour of old illustrious families before a desire for more?” (AP 196). It is this love and support from Arjun which gives her the strength and confidence to seek for divorce.

Janaki doubts whether she would have dared to do this had her father been alive. This is a clear pointer to the fact that patriarchal ideology still reigns supreme in her and she would not have had the courage to seek divorce had her father been alive. Her illicit relationship with Arjun breaking the cardinal rule of marriage does not leave any trace of guilt in her even though she is married and is the mother of a child. She doubts, “Was it because that was what was meant to be, because of some promise so ancient I could not even remember it now?” (AP 206).

Patriarchy uses various measures including threats, both physical and mental, to restrict a woman’s freedom of movement as well as the fulfilment of her wishes and plans. Suresh’s hurt pride drives him to report to the Immigration Department about the ‘illegal’ arrival of Janaki in England. But such threats do not deter her from giving up the marital bond as she thinks that divorce would give her the much craved for freedom in her life. She says, “I could defy centuries of tradition and go off into the world on my own” (AP 213). But divorce is something unthinkable and unacceptable to the traditional society. Feelings as diverse as fear, confusion, anger and disbelief make her mother and grandmother dislike their daughter on hearing her plans to divorce her husband.

The novel also presents the precarious condition of widows in our society. Padmaja Maraar’s mother, also called Ammumma in the novel, is a widow who earns her food by slaving all day and she is ordered by her own daughter to do all work at home. She takes her food only after everyone has taken his/her share including the drivers and servants. Life has “come to a halt” (AP 142) for Ma and her grandmother
as they too have become widows. Ma also follows, just like Ammumma, the traditional way of wearing white saris and appears calm and dejected because colourful saris painfully remind her of her colourful life with her husband. She accepts the role society has fixed for such people. She says: “This is my lot now, and I must bear it as cheerfully and graciously as I can. The past is to be left behind, a sweet memory” (AP143).

The seemingly autobiographical vein in the novel has aroused the curiosity of many readers. Misra was born in 1961 to a Malayalee family in New Delhi. The protagonist of the novel, Janaki, was also born and brought up in the big, busy, bustling city of New Delhi. Like Janaki’s parents, Misra’s parents also moved to Delhi when her father got his first posting in Delhi as “a Highly Placed Official” (AP 59) in the Indian Air Force. Jaishree Misra’s father, A.V.M Krishnan Nair was an Air-Vice-Marshall in the Indian Air Force like Janaki’s father, Unni, in the novel. Hence the family had to settle down in Delhi. So Misra and her brother were not well versed in Malayalam. Like Janaki’s father, Unni, Misra’s father too met with an untimely death. Like Janaki, Misra too had an MA degree in English. Her mother, Omana Nair, was a school teacher for a long time. In the novel, the Maraars found fault with Janaki’s mother’s “need to be a lowly school teacher” (AP 99).

Many readers have asked the novelist “How much of the story was true?” (AP 307) and her answer was that it was “semi autobiographical” (AP 307). She wrote:

I am not Janu, just as no character is ever quite the one it is based on. It is true that I did fall in love at seventeen. I, too, lost my teenage sweet heart to an English University and an arranged marriage . . . I do have a Riya, with a learning disability . . . I was quite consciously setting out to
blur the truth and fictionalize the story. . . reality ends abruptly on the road to Valapadu - a fictional name for a fictional town. (AP 308)

As stated in the author’s note, the novel is a fine blend of reality and fiction. Valapadu is the fictional locale in which the macabre and heart-rending marital drama is enacted. Misra was married into a well-to-do Nair family in Kottayam. She was working with BBC when she married a man with big business concerns. She had to resign her job due to family problems but more problems crept in when their daughter Rohini (Riya in the novel) was born with learning disabilities. The lack of love and attachment from her husband and his family left a deep scar on her psyche and her deep love and concern for Rohini, “my lucky mascot and unlikely muse” (AP 310), prompted her to undertake a course in Special Education in England. This helped her to meet her teenage sweet heart in England. She writes, “We met again, after a ten year period of silence, in circumstances not dissimilar to those described in the book” (AP 307). Later she gets a divorce and marries her teenage heartthrob to lead a fulfilling life.

Afterwards (period: 1990s)

Jaishree Misra’s Afterwards, published in 2004, is set in Kerala of the 1990s. The crisis in Maya’s life occurs when her family blindly follows the traditional Indian custom of marrying off their daughter at a relatively young age by bringing her academic pursuits to a halt. A student of English literature, Maya had to drop her studies in order to get married to Govind Warrier, a self-reliant man.

Even though her parents were well off and caring and though she had a beautiful, well-decorated house with a beautiful daughter, and a woman to assist her in her work and an all-providing husband and a nice car, life did not offer her happiness. According to Saradamoni, “The influence of the wider system on the family is stronger
today than in the past. Surprisingly, this often goes unnoticed, leaving us holding on to myths about the family as a haven where one can find peace, away from a harsh and cruel world” (173). People, including her parents, thought she was lucky because she had everything a woman needed but they failed to understand her psychological needs. According to her, “They don’t want to see the other side of that” (A 55). Here too tradition-bound parents, just like Janaki’s parents in Ancient Promises, believe that an alliance with a boy from a rich family is far more important than their daughter’s education and self-reliance. They fail to understand that a good house, car, servants and other amenities may not make a woman happy. Instead, what is valuable is to have an understanding, loving husband who respects and values the freedom and individuality of his wife. Like Janaki, Maya too was not allowed to marry the man of her choice.

Pulayil Varmas, an ancient and illustrious clan from which Maya descended, followed the marumakkathayam, the matrilineal system of inheritance which provided protection for women in a way no other society did. By the time Maya’s grandfather Vasudeva Varma died, the inheritance system of marumakkathayam had been abolished, but Bhageerathi Amma, his wife, ran the affairs of the house single-handedly, bringing up his son and sending him to study law in Bangalore. She even exercised her power to choose a wife for her son Madhava Varma. But the same law did not guarantee freedom to women and it punished women if they strayed. The freedom that was given to her son in matters of education was not given to her granddaughter by her son. Like his mother, he exercises his right to select a husband for his daughter Maya ending abruptly her dreams of higher education.

Pulayil Varmas were steeped in patriarchal values and they disown Maya for breaking the cardinal rule of marriage. According to Maya, “Coming from an old
family was a particular burden . . . The ancestors whisper at you down the generations” (A 5). Thus, a woman’s ancestry puts a lot of burden on her and she has enormous responsibility in safeguarding its traditions and values. She is thus aware of the dangers of violating such codes. But her virtual imprisonment forces her to flout such inhuman values in order to enter into forbidden relationship. She thus musters up courage to cast away a tormenting relationship, unmindful of the consequences, “without needing to look back, without having to look back at everything that had gone before, generations before her” (A 3). Her decision to defy age-old conventions and practices is unimaginable and unacceptable to her parents. Hence they call for the elayathu to perform her death rites three years before her actual death. The villagers’ gossip and the ignominy suffered by the family, especially by his old mother, force her father to give vent to his guilt and fury by performing the terrible ritual. Though her parents were in Bangalore for a long time, the cosmopolitan culture did not make any significant impact on them. And her father shows no leniency for her love affair and goes in for an arranged marriage.

Maya foolishly believes that the changing scenario will bring about change in the traditional, conservative beliefs of her parents and society, and thinks that she could be an agent of change in her family. “She had seemed to genuinely believe she could change things. Not just the way her family thought about her, but the way they thought about everything else as well” (A 3). She was confident that their love for their daughter would move them to alter their outlook. But the deeply rooted patriarchal and conservative values force them to close their door permanently on their daughter.

Maya’s mother is a supporter of traditional values and tries to inculcate such values in her daughter. This is clear from her mother’s attitude that marital life needs enormous adjustments and argues that nobody gets a perfect partner. According to her,
even if Govind was not a perfect partner for her she should not have expected them to accept what she did to her father and the family. The message is: A woman should be passive and be obedient to protect her marital life.

Maya’s mother is a mere shadow in the presence of her husband. She always accepted the decisions of her husband even when such decisions hurt the feelings and sentiments of the other members of the family. Her husband did not find it necessary to honour their feelings before performing the last rites of Maya. Though she does not support her daughter’s ‘wanton’ behaviour, she was equally upset with her husband’s decision to perform the final rites when their daughter was still very much alive. And she could not control her husband’s rage and refrain him from performing the death rites.

The importance attached to the institution of marriage, even during a time of rapid social and economic changes, is evident from the attitude of Maya’s father. Her decision to elope with Rahul and her ‘deviant’ behaviour challenge his patriarchal authority and his credentials as a father. The deep-seated cultural ethos and patriarchal superiority force him to perform the death rites – “Padi addachu pindam vekkal” (A 178). It means the death rites are performed and the doors are closed forever to ‘deviants’ who brought shame and dishonor to the noble family. He wrote to her, “Go and live your life in the way you have to. You do not exist for us anymore. We will forget you ever existed, just as you will have to forget about us. The Maya, who was once a child of this family, is now dead” (A 242- 243). This shows the blind importance attached to family honour. Thus, contrary to her expectations of a reconcilement for “she had seemed to genuinely believe she could change things” (A 3), they break the ties with her and her loving brother is forced to perform the last rites.
Like Ammu in *The God of Small Things*, Janaki in *Ancient Promises* and Lissy in *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride*, Maya too feels that a ‘good’ house resembles a ‘good’ cage for a woman in a patriarchal set-up. Her house becomes her little cage, “a nice cage”, where she has to wallow in grief, stifled by the loss of her freedom. Her loss of freedom becomes sheer torture for her and “she was a free spirit stifled by the confines of marriage” (A 58). She is denied even the freedom to go for shopping or meet friends except to visit her parents and even then he prefers that they come to meet her. Govind is influenced by gender stereotypes and is a symbol of patriarchal authority. He believes that a woman’s sphere should be restricted to familial roles. Her status largely depends on the simple biological fact that she is the bearer of his children and her responsibility is to look after the children and the affairs of the home. An individual’s loss of freedom in this beautiful cage is sheer torture. Her confinement becomes complete for she is jobless and is denied access to public spaces. She felt miserable and helpless and was determined to escape from this confinement.

According to Swapna Mukhopadhyay et al. “The straitjacket of a stereotypical gender ideology has kept the women in a time warp as it were and may very well have done so at the cost of heightened levels of mental distress and ill being” (89).

But contrary to Maya’s expectations, her husband was not keen to send her to college to complete her degree. But she flouts the norms of the society that a woman be given the type of education that will make her fit into traditional social and familial roles. But she takes the bold decision to study interior design, much to the chagrin of Govind. Education is a means of woman’s empowerment and she plans to escape from her husband when she is in a position to support herself and her daughter Anjali.

Education instilled in Maya confidence and courage and she fervently hopes to get a job. She throws away the marital bond, social conventions, public censure and
familial and cultural traditions which are nothing more than chains and manacles that bind her to this system. The boldness of a woman to run away with her lover shocks the cultural capital of the State. She takes the bold step even if it means risking her safety and happiness with her husband. When Rahul, a Delhite living in England, comes to Trivandrum to learn mridangam he is caught up in the vortex of their embittered emotions and rescues Maya by taking her to England. Rahul wonders about “the strange sorrows this woman was hiding behind her graceful facade” (A 39).

Rejection and denial of love from Govind force her to seek the same from Rahul. She finds it difficult to hold on to her marital life and decides to run away with Anjali, her daughter, to some faraway place as there is not a single soul to comfort her. Her husband’s long absences and her unhappy marriage force her to invite Rahul to her house in the evenings to overcome her loneliness. According to Rahul, Govind “wouldn’t have known of her unhappiness long before I even arrived” (A 201). Maya’s first encounter with the new neighbour brings about a lot of suspicion in Govind. Her explanations and pleadings did not satisfy an unreasonable man like Govind. Rahul realizes that her husband is a “complete wanker” (A 19) and “an utter prat” (A 47).

Even though he does not resort to wife-battering, Govind is always suspicious of her and she tells Rahul, “He gets suspicious thinking of all the things I might get up to in his absence” (A 56). Her husband’s suspicious nature makes her frightened of even talking to Rahul. She was the victim of an “obviously unhappy marriage” (A 27). Probably it is due to his suspicious nature that people including their neighbours do not visit their house, thus, adding to her loneliness. Rahul had noticed this aloofness of the family and had not seen anyone else visiting her house except her parents. His reference to her husband’s ‘visit’ points to his long absences and his indifference to his
wife and child. Just like his Esteem, which, with its darkly shuttered windows, hides the physical identity of the individual inside, his true nature is shrouded in mystery.

Patriarchal society blames women, especially the daughters-in-law, for their failure in achieving good relationships with their husbands and in-laws. Like Govind, his parents are also suspicious of Maya. They suspect her involvement in taking their precious son away from them and forcing him to stop sending them money. But in reality it is Govind who is not interested in having a cordial relationship with his parents. His business mind forces him to keep them at a distance and does not entertain their visits to his house as it might encourage them to linger on. To Maya, even his attempt to send them money is to show the public that he is a good and loving son. He fulfils their financial needs but their emotional needs are ignored. He is a symbol of the modern man who values freedom and independence more than relationships.

Rahul is a modern man. He declares: “I just do what I want to do, go where I want to go . . . big important things, like family ties and statehood and even nationhood seem to have passed me by completely” (A 40-41). Such men value their relationship at work place more than their blood relations and family relationships disproving the claim that ‘blood is thicker than water’.

Rahul is aware of the gender stereotypes prevalent in the Indian society. He knows that a woman’s relationship with another man would bring trouble to her and not to the man. Being a male, he exercises his power to take independent decisions, unmindful of the consequences and never regrets his impulsive decisions. It is this independent nature that helps him to take Maya to his house in Delhi at first and later to his work place in England. Even though his parents took Maya and Anjali into their house, they had their suspicions but did not voice their objections as he was a self-
reliant man. He enjoys the freedom to speak and act according to his conscience but women of his generation are denied such rights. Germaine Greer affirms that, “marriage cannot be a job as it has become . . . The woman who realizes that she is bound by a million Lilliputian threads in an attitude of impotence and hatred masquerading as tranquility and love has no option but to run away, if she is not to the corrupted and extinguished utterly” (22).

Govind, though “not a bad man”, was “just misguided” (A 195) by his patriarchal values and this ruined their marriage and her life. He does not know the reason for his wife’s unhappiness and takes no effort to alleviate her grievances. He was an old fashioned man with conservative ideas and beliefs.

Modern women’s exposure to western customs and practices brought about drastic attitudinal changes in them. Maya was attracted by the Western notion of individualism. Though she had never been to England, she is well aware of its customs and practices. Her growing up in a city like Bangalore helped her to get exposed to western culture through English films and books. Maya, who is scared to think about being far away from the people she loves, is courageous enough to leave them and go to a distant place like England due to her failed marital life. Women often become dejected and crest fallen when their marriages go haywire because they think “all the time about what other people want, what other people think . . .” (A 41). This is diametrically opposite to the attitude of the westerners. The West taught her not to poke her nose into other people’s business and according to her “That was one thing England had taught me well” (A 28).

Maya musters up courage to assert her right as a human being. She becomes adamant and tells Rahul that he cannot control her forever. Rahul notices her stubbornness and “willingness to flirt with danger” (A 24). Her “risky defiant” (A 37)
nature is the result of her caged and trapped existence which suddenly makes her “terrifyingly fearless” (A 37). The loss of freedom is a sheer torture to her and this drives her to seek education and a job. Her proud and independent nature did not allow her to be economically dependent on Rahul. This forces her to study interior design so that she can be on her own.

Maya, who “doesn’t like confined spaces” (A 175) of the patriarchal society, breathes the air of freedom when she goes to England with Rahul. London gave them the space to build their relationship and also to engage in voluntary service like helping vulnerable women and children. Rahul admits that London had given them “the space without which our relationship might not have grown and survived” (A 104). The West stands in sharp contrast to the East in its attitude to an individual’s freedom. People in the West respect other’s freedom. They know how to avoid and respect other people’s space.

Maya breaks the fetters of her slavish existence when she decides to live with Rahul even when divorce was not granted by Govind. If companionship and support for each other are the essential qualities of any good relationship, then Maya’s relationship with Rahul is an example of that relationship. Rahul’s statement will amplify this fact: “She wasn’t my wife actually. We lived together. But, yeah, sure, she was my . . . my wife, I guess. The nearest I ever got to it. Or ever will . . .” (A 165).

A modern, liberated man like Rahul does not find any meaning in Maya’s father’s rage. He argues, “How meaningless rage was, really, in the end. His rage, taking light and burning in funeral fires back in the compound of that graceful old house, had come to nothing as well. What was the point in anything at all once the final fires were burnt?” (A 249). Rahul is surprised to find that a State which boasts that
its people are cultured and educated should bitterly oppose Maya’s chance of a new family. The imposing grand house with its tall and rusty iron gates is suggestive of its resistance to social and cultural changes and stern and imposing patriarchal authority. Maya is surprisingly silent when the conversation is about Kerala and her parents because both of them have, contrary to her expectations, wounded her much.

Maya did not like going back to Kerala because she really had no family to fall back upon. Her vivid recollections of those painful events are so tormenting that she always remained surprisingly silent on the subject. Women’s search for liberation and empowerment often becomes a forbidding experience as women like Maya “just get so bogged down, thinking all the time about what other people want, what other people think . . .” (A 41).

Patriarchal prejudices and public censure force Maya’s mother, who has become a widow, to seek asylum in Bhagawati Kshetram at Tirunelmala even though she herself admits that she is not very religious. She is devastated by too many unfriendly questions about her daughter. She says, “People will not let me forget about my daughter, too many questions, too many nosy people” (A 247). Clad in widow’s white clothes, she chooses a confined and solitary life. She looked older than her age and Rahul noticed that “she had aged immensely” (A 256).

The novel also deals with the sufferings of children who are forced to live in orphanages without getting the emotional and psychological support they desperately need at their age. Maya’s death in a car accident in England leaves in a balance the fate of Anjali. Anjali, not being Rahul’s biological daughter, is entrusted with the Faunce Way Children’s Home where its authorities are trying to make things as normal as possible for Anjali. Anjali longs for the warmth of her home and in the absence of both she becomes listless and is not her usual self. Social Services have failed to provide
what is best for the child and even if they did, it could not compensate for the absence of genuine ties. Even at her young age she shows the mettle to withstand the inhospitable surroundings which is clear from her response to Govind when he tells her not to take the red coat that could make her melt in the extreme heat in Kerala. Her response is, “No. I won’t melt! I’m a girl, not a candle” (A 210).

*Mistress* by Anita Nair (Period 1937-1971 to now)

Like the novels discussed earlier, *Mistress* too is concerned with the subordinate position of women in our family and society and their efforts to set themselves free from such stifling enclosures. Even though the waves of change have swept through Kerala, they have not succeeded in cleansing the state of evils like patriarchy and the cruelty meted out to women and children. *Mistress* deals with the ‘fractured’ marital life of Radha and Shyam which gets into a sea of troubles with the arrival of Christopher Stewart, also known as Chris, from America. A travel writer, Chris, arrives in Kerala to meet Koman, Radha’s uncle, a famous Kathakali dancer, to write about him. Koman comes to know that Chris’s arrival is actually to find out the identity of his father rather than writing a book about him. Koman’s grand father and grand mother never married and he was the product of the relationship called *sambandham*.

His mother had never been a wife. She shared nothing of her husband’s life, except his bed. The word *sambandham* was perfect to describe marriages of this nature . . . A bond, a sexual bond, and no more. Sethu had grown up not knowing who his father was. He had moved on, and another man had taken his place. It was considered perfectly normal for a woman to change her husband, if it didn’t suit either of them to continue with their relationship. A boy grew up looking up to his maternal uncle rather than his father, who was little
more than a casual visitor, and the women sitting on the steps of the bathing pond talked about their sambandhams as if they were discussing glass bangles. (M 235)

In the changed circumstances where *sambandam* is no longer an accepted pattern of marital alliance, a man and woman living together without marriage were looked at with distrust. This attitude of the society to co-habitation, a relationship outside marriage, is clear from the attitude of Koman’s relatives who insist that he marries Angela, a western scholar, to avoid gossip and scandal tarnishing the reputation of the family. His father realizes the need for “a family and a home” (M 371) to support one in his/her later life. But according to Koman, “Angela is my wife. Sometimes relationships don’t need rituals to sanctify them” (M 371). But the disenchantment is clear from his statement that “Marriage was not for him. In fact, he often wondered if marriage was for anybody” (M 328). But due to the absence of any social sanction for their relationship, Koman could not even introduce or take her to his family because they were an unmarried couple in the eyes of their relatives and society.

Radha’s father attached a lot of importance to societal values. He found happiness in conforming to social values. According to Radha, “Everything was constructed around social standing and honour. If something was acceptable to society, he liked it. If it bore even the slightest taint of the illicit, he refused to have anything to do with it” (M 343). Radha herself admits that he was rigid in his attitudes and practices. Thus the values held by her father stand in opposition to the values she practiced.

The novel is mainly about love and relationships and depicts the fractured married life of Radha and Shyam. From her first meeting, Radha is drawn to the enigmatic young man with his cello and her relationship with Chris sows the seeds of
discontent in her life bringing to near destruction her unhappy marital life. The
structure of Kathakali and the use of nine *rasas* help the novelist foreground the strong
emotions in the lives of its characters. The various emotions, including tensions, that
Radha undergoes are vividly portrayed through the nine *rasas*.

Radha and Shyam have been married for eight years and their marriage is
marked by ritual and routine but not of love and sharing. According to Radha, Shyam
considers his wife a “possession. A much cherished possession. That is my role in his
life. He doesn’t want an equal; what he wants is a mistress. Someone to indulge and
someone to indulge him with feminine wiles” (M 53). According to him, she is his
*Syumantaka* gem and he feels that she is beautiful and shines. There is a sense of pride
in him that she is his. But her predicament is like that of a butterfly in a lab which
wants to fly to freedom even as it is pinned to a board for dissection.

Radha does not want to be confined within the four walls of the house. She
always wanted to live outside the protected world where he likes to keep her in. Her
unhappiness and loneliness in marital life are the result of his disregard for her feelings
and wishes, and they do not have even meals together at the resort. When the resort
offers comfortable and healthy stay for others, it is a bone of discontent for this couple.
Unlike Radha, Shyam’s thriving business helps him to bury his unhappiness behind
him. For him money is everything and it helps him to have a positive attitude to life.

Being a woman of the twenty-first century, Radha is not morally bound by
traditional customs and practices. She “feels nothing for him except perhaps a habitual
annoyance” (M 13) and detachment. Thus, one of the nine phases of human emotions,
*sringaaram*, highlights the lukewarm attitude of Radha to her husband Shyam and her
infatuation and admiration for the cello player Chris. She moves away from her
husband to whom art and aesthetics are alien subjects and a sharp contrast is made
between Chris and Shyam. Radha is embarrassed by Shyam’s lack of artistic taste. The presence of Chris and his music remind her of her miserable life and she thinks, “If there is a thought that goes with me, it is only sorrow for what could have been” (M 115).

Shyam’s identity is constructed through or is the result of his personal possessions and achievements. A man identifies himself with his social status, occupation and the wealth he has acquired, and women often figure last on his list of possessions. Shyam considers him a blessed man because he has a beautiful home and a prosperous business – the result of his hard work and intelligence. Even his wife is one of the precious things in his possession. To him, even her identity in the society is inextricably related to his social standing. This is clear from his statement: “You are my wife and you have a place in the society” (M 72). According to Meena Kelkar, “The depth grammar of Indian philosophical discourse does not encourage the language of identity rather it encourages sublimation of identity in the form of consideration of all” (37).

Shyam is a down-to-earth business man who is the sole owner and proprietor of vast property and she is made the mistress of the property but only in name. Being a self-made man, he has “an exaggerated sense of self-worth” (M 13). He boasts that his acquisitions include the resort, an Ambassador car and even his wife Radha. This results in an attitude of superiority on his part and a sense of detachment from her. But this male ego, his much-heightened sense of self, jeopardizes his marriage and life.

Simone de Beauvoir speaks about the unequal relationship between the husband and wife and the masculine trait to affirm his ownership of woman in The Second Sex: “subordinated economically and socially to her husband, the good wife is the man’s most precious treasure. She belongs to him so profoundly that she partakes of the same
essence as he; she has his name, his gods, and he is responsible for her . . . through her he displays his power before the world: she is his measure and his earthly portion” (207).

Shyam’s vanity is clear from his desire to own Padmanabhan, the tusker. His blind worship of material value is clear from his attitude that property and resources can compensate for all his loss. The loss of his wife is sure to be compensated by the possession of wealth and the elephant, thus proving that his wife was nothing but a part of his valuable possessions. The picture of two lions on the gate-posts of his resort makes him swell with pride.

The conflict between traditional and modern values is evident in Radha. Even though like any traditional Indian woman she swore when she married Shyam that she would never flout the rules of custom and tradition, she pays the least regard for convention and honour and this is highlighted by her relationship with Chris. True to the spirit of a liberated woman, Radha, like Chris, is least worried about what people would think of her conduct. Being a modern woman, she did not bother about what anyone thought of her or about her relationship with her former lover. Even when she became pregnant by him, she pretends that she is married and meets a doctor to abort the child. It is this attitude that is revealed when she tells Shyam on their wedding night that she is not a virgin. Radha is unmindful of societal restrictions and acts independently. As a woman who firmly believes in the total liberation of woman, she is unmindful of social restrictions. She even finds fault with Chris for weaning her away from the traditional role of a wife. She is being torn between traditional values on the one hand and the modern liberated view inherited by her through her education and social contacts on the other.
Every culture has its own way of controlling the behaviour of its women in accordance with its patriarchal values. They are transmitted from one generation to the other through its myths and rituals. When Radha violates and crosses the lines of husband-wife relationship, she is reminded of the Ahalya myth. Ahalya is punished by her husband, Sage Gautama, for her infidelity. She was discovered in bed with Indra, the king of the gods, who, in order to dispel her doubts, disguised himself as her husband. On finding her extra-marital relationship, her husband cursed her to become a stone. Later Rama happened to step on the stone and the stone came to life and became Ahalya. Even though Indra too was punished, it was “poor Ahalya who bore the brunt of the curse. Let that be a reminder to you, I told myself” (M 58). Radha is, thus, aware of the danger of infidelity and is afraid whether her relationship with Chris would land her in a state from which “there was no escape” (M 58). She is aware that any extra-marital relationship is more dangerous for women than men.

In contrast to Radha, Rani Oppol, Shyam’s sister-in-law, is very traditional in her outlook and conduct. She considers Radha’s behaviour improper because she fails to conform to the traditional roles and at the same time criticises her for confining herself to the house, thus restricting the full flowering of her personality. According to her, girls should be “smart and independent” (M 60).

Rani has internalized the traditional expectations a society has about a woman and values the traditional way of life. Even though she exhorts Radha to find herself a job she expects her to dress modestly in saris and have children. To her, Radha’s reluctance and failure to fulfil her traditional role cannot be justified. So Rani supports Shyam and finds ‘reason’ in his decisions obviously hinting at the idea that patriarchal power should prevail over women. To Rani, Radha is lucky to have a husband like Shyam who thinks of her all the time. Her husband, she points out, would remember
her only if his food did not appear on the table. “That is what I am, his cook and washerwoman” (M 248).

The primary role assigned to a woman by any patriarchal society is the role of a mother and a carer, and the failure to fulfil this role brings social ostracization. This is evident from the attitude of her sister-in-law. Radha becomes a victim of social isolation when she is told by her sister-in-law that she is not expected to come with them for attending the seemantham of the daughter of a Brahmin family from Palakkad. Her arrival is objected to on the ground that a married woman without a child for a long time would be considered a macchi - a childless woman. It is considered inauspicious to have a barren woman at such auspicious functions. Women without children are ostracized. But men with the same disability are not sidelined. In the husband-wife relationship, it is the duty of the wife to provide her husband a child, preferably a son, to continue his progeny.

Many of Rani’s values and principles are traditional and they stand in contrast to the modern, liberated views of Radha. To Radha, she is a “happy, vixen, whinger, nag, bitch” (M 60), who is insensitive to the feelings and sentiments of others. Rani’s visit to Shyam’s house often leaves Radha infuriated and feeling totally worthless. According to Radha, this “beastly woman” (M 61) robs her of all her self-esteem and she has been enduring it for long. Thus the conflict between Rani and Radha is the conflict between traditional and modern values.

Love as an institution works according to the rules of men. It nurtures their dominance and helps to bring women under their control without pretending that it is an institution. According to Beauvoir, “Men have found it possible to be passionate lovers at certain times in their lives, but there is not one of them who could be called ‘a great lover’ . . . that they still want is to take possession of her . . . the beloved woman is
only one value among others; they wish to integrate her into their existence and not to squander it entirely on her” (652-653). The unwritten laws of love exhort women to surrender themselves for the comforts of men. The total surrender of women for the sake of love makes it easier for the patriarchal society to bring them completely under its control. Society expects a woman to lead a life of submissiveness and patience according to the expectations of men.

This patriarchal attitude is evident from the attitude of Shyam. When Shyam feels that their marriage is threatened he proclaims that he has loved her more than anything or anyone. Even though he compliments her that she is ravishing in her looks, she does not find this reason enough to make her happy. She understands the hollowness of such eloquence. According to her, Shyam falsely believes that such “exaggerated compliments will make me happy and ensure marital bliss” (M 61). He is of the opinion that women are victims of flattery and even a self-contained woman as Radha is not an exception. Radha, being a modern liberated woman, is well aware of the hidden strategies employed by the patriarchal society to subjugate women.

Shyam is much concerned about the external show of things. He prefers to read Malayalam dailies but in public he would be reading The Hindu and the New Indian Express. To Radha, “it feeds his lust for the bizarre and trivia” (M 59). He does not want an assertive woman as a wife; instead he prefers “a glossy, silly wife to a homely, practical one. Glossy, silly wives are malleable” (M 61). According to him, they have a respectable place in the society. Radha feels trapped by such expectations.

The different value system shared by them is clear when Radha appreciates the ‘exquisite workmanship’ of the thookuvilakku which he got after his mother’s death, Shyam values its ‘precious bronze’. He is a businessman and values an object for its material value. To him, “the only music I hear is the ringing of cash registers, the only
literature I read is the writing on currency notes; my favourite paintings are stacks of industrial chimneys and my sense of rhythm is derived from the grinding of cogs and wheels. I don’t belong in their world and they prefer that I don’t try and trespass” (M 117).

Shyam is ambitious and money-minded and his frantic drive to amass wealth is criticised by Radha. They have different perspectives on money. The husband-wife relationship fails to take off as they fail to fix their priorities and thus settle their disputes. Conversations and discussions are done away with as they cannot reach a consensus on anything including music or film, or even such insignificant things as the choice of plants in their garden. Shyam, who was a marketing executive with Hindustan Lever, makes use of the marketing strategies to promote his business. But a good marital relationship cannot be built on verbal jugglery and one needs genuine love and interest. The man who is sensitive to his clients’ needs and tastes, fails to know his wife’s desires and interests, and does not have even the faintest notion of how her mind works.

Male supremacy cannot be attributed to just physical superiority alone as Millet suggests in Sexual Politics: “Male supremacy, like other political creeds, does not finally reside in physical strength but in the acceptance of a value system which is not biological” (27). Shyam’s ego is satisfied when she, like a traditional woman, starts discharging her womanly duties. She, being the woman of the house, has the duty to light the lamp and it should not be entrusted to the maid. And when she starts doing her familial chores as a dutiful wife, Shyam feels blessed. “I am a blessed man, I think. I have a beautiful home and a prosperous business. And I have Radha. My Radha” (M 66). In her familial role she becomes even more beautiful and attractive—“the lamp
lights up her eyes. Her hair flows down on her back” (M 66). A man becomes pleased with his wife when she conforms to such stereotypes.

Shyam always refers to his wife as “my Radha” and her wish to live her own life is thwarted by her husband. To him, it is his right to exercise control over her. She complains, “I wanted to teach in one of the primary schools and you said it was too much work for too little money. When I wanted to start a tuition class, you said the same . . . Don’t I have a right to an opinion? I am your wife, do you hear me? But you treat me as if I am a kept woman. A bloody mistress to fulfil your sexual needs and with no rights” (M 73). He shares the view that “Birds are meant to be free. And women are not. Women need to be looked after” (M 75). Shyam’s refusal to give her any financial autonomy makes her life miserable.

The Indian male is exposed to a set of beliefs and values in which male supremacy is unchallenged and female subjugation is taken for granted. Shyam ignores her and even her genuine complaints are brushed aside. He controls all her choices and activities including the type of dress she should wear. He does not like her wearing stiff khadi kurtas. They remind him of “those activist women burning with vitriol and a cause” (M 117). Man’s intolerance to questioning, especially by women, is clear from his attitude. He would like her to fit in within the traditional feminine role and this is brought out through his statement, “Women should wear silk, jewellery and flowers in their hair” (M 117). He gradually finds that his hold over Radha is precarious even after eight years of marriage.

The predicament of women in family and society is compared to the predicament of the caged bird at Shyam’s house which bites and injures his finger badly. The caged bird, Malini, obviously stands for Radha and its responses are suggestive of her attitudes to Shyam and Chris. Failing to understand the throes of
suppression, and instead of sympathizing with the suppressed, he compares the bird to a
dog and says, “Like master, like bird” (M 107), comparing Radha to Malini. But the
same bird becomes “a feisty thing” (M 107) for Chris. He fondles the bird as she shut
her eyes in enjoyment. Radha is captivated by Chris’s conversations leading to a
deeper intimacy between them. “It was an intimacy with a million nerve ends. And
then I would go home with a want in me that threatened to take my life over” (M 107).

Radha’s feminist attitude could be traced back to her younger years when she
failed to fulfil the traditional expectations of a daughter. Her father expected “his
daughter to make a brilliant marriage into a family that will match them in status and
wealth” (M 119). When Shyam’s proposal came by she was forced to marry him
because she feared that in a weak moment she would be forced to go back to her former
lover. Thus, her consent to marry him was due to her ‘reputation’ and not out of any
love for Shyam. Before bringing more disgrace and damage to herself and to her
family, her father ‘buys’ her a husband.

The patriarchal attitude that woman is inferior to man is clear from Shyam’s
attitude to Radha. Even though she used to drive excellently while she was in
Bangalore, Shyam does not allow her to drive saying that she does not know clutch
from brake. She objects to this attitude of belittling her qualities and takes the bold step
to resume her driving wanting to put an end to his behaviour of sidelining her.

Modern times have witnessed remarkable changes in the gender equation.
Education and careers for women have played a tremendous influence on their attaining
freedom and emancipation. This changing scenario puts the Indian male in a complex
situation in which he is obliged to embrace new ideas but is unable to reject the old
ones. Shyam is partly modern in the sense that he grants freedom to Radha but at the
same time is afraid that his position is shaky.
An important aspect of masculine identity is sexuality which is seen as a sign of strength and superiority. A woman’s indifference to her husband and her sexual attraction for another man directly question the masculinity of her husband. The male identifies greatly with his sexual prowess which plays an important part in creating the collective as well as individual male identities. Shyam feels that he is robbed of his manhood. But he knows that if he were to rebuke her, she would continue to do exactly the same thing in order to spite him. He wanted at least some show of respect from his wife. But she responds: “What do you want me to do? Lick your feet” (M 163).

Shyam finds his masculinity questioned by her unacceptable deeds and objects to her way of life. He complains, “You strut about the place with strange men, you come home at midnight and expect me to say nothing. No husband would tolerate this. What do you think I am? A fucking eunuch?” (M 163). The bitter exchange of words including the assertion of each one’s rights drives Shyam to assert his superiority and rights over her body. “Then I fucked her. The resentment I felt for being tolerated rather than loved, the yearning I had suffered, the loneliness of these eight years, all fused to become a consuming desire to possess her. To make her mine. To reach within and tear down that film of indifference that coated her eyes each time I took her in my arms” (M 163). He wanted to reinforce the idea that she is his possession. “You are my wife. You are mine” (M 163). He wanted to prove his control over her body by an act of rape which leaves a deep scar on her psyche.

Rape is sexual act that is seen as a psychologically potent tool to overpower, control and ‘put women in their place’ by men. This is clear from Radha’s statement:

Two nights have passed since Shyam plundered my body, seized and took away my right to say no. Time hasn’t made it better, only worse.
I close my eyes, willing myself to forget. But I cannot shut my mind to the expression in his eyes. His eyes seared and burnt. They said: you are mine. Shyam’s eyes branded me more than his body did. (M 164-65)

Radha begins to feel safe only in the absence of Shyam because the forced sexual act leaves her insecure even in her own house. To her, “Rape is rape, even when sanctified by marriage. And the rapist doesn’t have to be a stranger emerging from the shadows. He could be your husband. What Shyam did was to rape me” (M 164-165). Even though Radha felt “sore and bruised, invaded and robbed” (M 165) she pretended that nothing had happened in order to deprive Shyam of the pleasure of having imposed his will. This forceful act, together with her attachment for Chris, force her to reiterate her stand: “I was never his. And I never will be” (M 165). If the purpose of Shyam’s rape was to bring her under his control, “he was wrong” (M 165), according to her. She thus deprives Shyam of his masculine pride in controlling and subjugating his wife. To her, no matter what the world is going to think about her, she shows courage to be herself.

Sexual discrimination, harassment and exploitation are other methods adopted by all patriarchal societies to subjugate and control women. “Sex is used as a weapon to try to debase the woman, to train her to accept a demeaning self-view, to see herself as a thing rather than a person in her own right” (Kishwar 155).

The Indian psyche is strongly influenced by the mythical characters whom they emulate at the subconscious level. The ideals that men have to emulate are powerful and sometimes even violent, whereas women have submissive, self-sacrificing and passive characters to idealise. Indian masculinity arose out of this deep-rooted sense of superiority in relation to women who were subjugated and oppressed. Shyam is filled with arrogance and triumph, a smile characteristic of a conqueror. He is compared to
Ravana in Bali Vadham who is the ultimate symbol of haughtiness. “Every fibre of his body pulsed with the measure of conquest” (M 174) and he resembled Ravana.

Mythology often glorifies men and their achievements but Nair uses characters from mythology who are weak and are failures in their respective roles. Radha’s uncle compares Shyam to Keechakan, the able commander-in-chief of the kingdom of Vidharbha, who kept his kingdom invisible with his might and battle strategies. But his passion for Sairandri, his sister’s handmaiden, blinded him. Like Keechakan, Shyam’s passion to conquer and possess the business world is the main reason for the disharmony between the couple. Radha’s uncle finds a similarity between his uncouthness, his lack of finesse and his ego and that of Bheema. He remarks: “Learning to like Shyam requires an effort that neither she nor I seem to want to make. Perhaps it’s his own fault. He makes it so much easier for us to dislike him” (M 32-33). Shyam is an “uncouth boar” (M 9) and is insensitive to the feelings and sentiments of others. He does not care even if his veiled barbs hurt his wife even though they are not consciously made to hurt her.

Shyam is aware that it is futile to suppress her thirst for freedom by using force. Manu says, “No man is able to guard women entirely by force, but they can be entirely guarded by using these means: he should keep her busy amassing and spending money, engaging in purification, attending to her duty, cooking food and looking after the furniture” (198). So he tries to make her busy with a lot of engagements and keeps a watch on her movements.

If women are the victims of male cruelty in the novels discussed earlier, with Mistress the situation changes. Though Radha too is a victim of her husband’s neglect and possessiveness, Shyam too suffers in this novel. Her modern outlook and ideas about women’s identity and liberation drive him into a desperate state. The absence of
his wife even during night makes him suspicious about her marital fidelity, forcing him
to ask, “What if she wasn’t with uncle? What if she was with Chris?” (M 200). He
doubts everything she says. Her cold and sometimes sarcastic responses trouble and
irritate him.

Her failure to communicate drives him to resort to alcohol. He feels that he is
being excluded from the company of uncle and Chris. Radha turns to Chris, not to her
husband, in her intense moments of despair to get courage and confidence. His
presence wipes away the discontent and dissatisfaction in her life. Manu declares,
“Men must make their women dependent day and night, and keep under their own
control those who are attached to sensory objects. Her father guards her in youth and
her son guards her in old age. A woman is not fit for independence” (197). Shyam is
reminded of his fearful days in his youth and the same fear has come back to haunt him
again. He admits that he is jealous especially when someone or something threatens his
place in her life. He says:

I am jealous of your childhood friends. Of your uncle, who seems to
command your loyalty and trust while I have to wait for crumbs to come
my way . . . of even your memories that exclude me. Which is why,
each time you said you were planning to do something with, I found
reasons for you to not do it. I don’t like sharing you with anyone. I
don’t like anything that draws you away from me. (M 242)

Their relationship has reached a point where Shyam believes that she has been
cheating on him. Her failure to attend his phone calls and the way she responds to his
queries and the hastiness with which she winds up the calls make him suspicious about
her marital fidelity. The relationship is, thus, marked by the absence of mutual trust
and affection.
Shyam is unimaginative whereas Radha is a modern woman with her own convictions. An imaginative woman like Radha finds Shyam’s company boring. According to her, his tastes are “plebeian” (M 124). He is a thorough businessman who fails to appeal to the unconscious. Radha and uncle, according to Shyam, have divided the world into two—those who are imaginative and those who are dull and stupid. Thus the traditional division of people into man and woman and the association of man with physical superiority and woman with physical vulnerability are subverted by this classification by Radha.

Shyam wants to regulate and oversee all her activities including things that are quite personal. His attempt to rule her by checking even her menstrual cycle is a symbol of his attempt to control her life. On her part, she wanted to rob him of his false notion of masculinity and thus, challenge the foundations of his masculine identity. Thus, Shyam, the man, is partly a failure because he fails to impregnate his wife. She retaliates, “I was pregnant once. So it isn’t that I can’t conceive. Perhaps you need to find out if you can father a child” (M 203).

Shyam was shocked by her public statement of her pregnancy and the thought that he could be sterile. But he is not surprised because “Radha has not let me penetrate her soul in nearly six years of marriage, so what chance has my sperm to penetrate her egg? The fortress walls she hides behind are beyond my sperms and me” (M 204). But Shyam, being a male chauvinist, thinks: “How can I have an infertility problem . . . Women were infertile, not men” (M 204). He wants Radha to look at him as a “full-bodied, red-blooded alpha male capable of fathering a hundred and one children” (M 205).

Shyam’s attempt to regulate and monitor her life becomes unbearable to her. She feels angrier than before and finds tolerance impossible any longer. “I cannot bear
to be this insufferable man’s wife” (M 206). She is aware that the world would consider her relationship with Chris as an adulterous one but she loves him and he is ‘fire’ in her blood. To Radha, they are like “twin halves of a being” (M 207). Even though she is married for eight years Shyam does not mean anything to her.

The male attitude that women are more concerned about sex than about relationship is proved wrong in the case of Radha. Shyam’s failure to accept and love her as an individual forces her to welcome the presence of Chris. Her love for Chris is not completely based on physical attraction. If so, physical union should have made her feel contented. Instead, she feels awkward and asks, “Had our passion dwindled to this?” (M 249). She is furious and disturbed by Chris’ attitude to their relationship. She asks, “Is this all our relationship is about, Chris?” (M 347). Thus even her relationship with Chris does not help her in developing her personality.

In a patriarchal society motherhood is valued and respected only within the institution of marriage. But Radha cannot accept this practice of confining motherhood to such an institution. Even when she realises that she is pregnant, she prefers the uncertainty of its paternity because she does not want the child to tie her to Shyam for life. Many unhappy marriages are saved from a complete break-up because of the future of the couple’s children. Women attach lot of importance to the destiny of their children and are forced to remain within the marital bond in spite of being victimised.

But Radha is against this and she does not want to be a traditional mother. Her decision to leave Shyam shocks him. To him, marriage has to be protected at least for the sake of their unborn child though he knows that he is not the biological father of the child. But Radha is adamant and declares that she cannot live with him even for the sake of the child.
Patriarchal society’s intolerance to women who cross its boundaries is clear from Shyam’s attitude. He wanted to wreak vengeance on her either by killing or putting her to intense suffering because “she smells of secrets and guilt” (M 350). Being the husband of an ‘adulteress,’ he doubts whether he will be able to defend his honour. He recollects the story of a man who chopped off his wife’s head on proving her unfaithful and the murderer was honoured by the police by offering him a chair because they too believed that an adulteress deserved to be killed. Shyam, “a broken man, hurt and humiliated” (M 397), knows that his hold on her is so delicate that even accusing her of her misdeeds would result in her loss. He knows that he cannot father a child. The child is going to be a “living evidence of her betrayal” (M 351). He finds his honour and self-respect gradually giving way to dishonour and humiliation.

Modern women’s attitude to marriage has undergone changes. According to Radha, her love affair is nothing more than an act of defiance, and not a betrayal. She wants to express her defiance against androcentric social norms by indulging in adulterous relationships. It is her “loneliness and a funnelling need that had exploded into unbridled passion” (M 399-400). But she never had any feeling that she was committing a crime or betraying anybody by her relationship with Chris. She admits that she has robbed Shyam of his pride and has no love left for him.

*Mistress* highlights Radha’s courage to stand by her conviction and make her own decisions. So she has to choose whether to stay in her marriage or accept the fruits of extra-marital relationship by accepting Chris. Shyam is inherently patriarchal in his attitudes but Nair dislocates the male hegemonic centre in her narration. The structure and mode of narration permit each character to reveal his/her identity.

Most of the male characters in the novel are presented without much masculinity. For example, Shyam is not a man of virility. Likewise, Sebastian, the
new recruit to the resort, though an impressive looking man is inefficient. Koman and Chris suffer from identity crisis. Chris’s long search to find the identity of his father yields him no result. Koman, though a successful artist, is a failure in life. Thus *Mistress* is a powerful novel which questions the patriarchal and gender stereotypes of the society.

Radha’s search for understanding and true happiness ends in disappointment. But this act helps her to realise her self and identity without the help of men or to be more precise by the rejection of both men. All that Shyam wanted was Radha’s love and acceptance and for that he accepts her back with Chris’s illegitimate child.

Towards the end of the novel Radha chooses to exercise her individuality and independence by rejecting both Shyam and Chris. She realises that she cannot live with one or the other. To her, both Chris and Shyam stand for the same values and principles and one is a shadow of the other. The desire that Radha felt for Chris gradually loses its hold on her. That is the moment when she is able to experience *shaantam* or peace. It is “Detachment. Freedom. An absence of desire. A coming to terms with life” (M 397).

Shyam’s failure to heal her broken feelings led her to despise him. She was lonely when Chris met her and his presence gave her the much desired companionship that she desperately needed in her life. The thought of Chris forms a part of her memory. She experiences tranquility and wants the comfort of her husband. She is drawn to him because of her fear of the outer world which is always up in arms against women who fight against oppressive forces.

The characters of the third phase are not ready to follow patriarchal conventions and traditions. They vehemently protest against their confinement in the family. They object to the traditional system of marital arrangement and value companionship in
relationship. Education and exposure to western values and ways of life coupled with their sufferings have given them enormous energy to fight for their rights. They value women’s bodily experiences and are ready to throw away tormenting relationships for their emotional, sexual and psychological fulfillment.

Ancient Promises, Afterwards and Mistress reflect the attitudes of men of the post-1990s Kerala. Men treat women as objects and marital life is characterized by the absence of genuine concern and the attempt to annihilate women’s independence and initiatives. The women protagonists in these novels show remarkable courage and self-confidence to challenge the patriarchal authority. They challenge gender inequality and the patriarchal biases of the society.

Janaki becomes an enlightened woman when she becomes aware that education would help her to find a job and escape from the Maraar rejection. She musters up courage to break this tormenting relationship and attaches least importance to public censure. Janaki’s suffering and her exposure to western values and notions of freedom encourage her to undertake a course in Special Education which eventually helps her to find employment. Her independent spirit and determination make her an empowered woman of the modern period.

Maya’s decision to flout age-old conventions and practices by eloping with another man is unacceptable and unimaginable to her parents. Maya, a victim of total neglect by her husband and her family, musters up courage to cast away the tormenting relationship, unmindful of the consequences. She is unmindful of the social conventions, public censure and familial and cultural traditions. She suffers but when her suffering becomes unbearable, she takes the bold step to get out of this strained relationship. She too is an empowered woman of the modern period.
Radha is slightly different from Janaki and Maya. She openly challenges patriarchal norms by indulging in sexual relationship with another man. It is an open declaration of her protest against misogynist values of the consumerist patriarchal society. Her attitudes and beliefs are quite different from those of the traditional women. Radha never felt that she was committing a crime or betraying Shyam by indulging in a physical relationship with Chris. According to her, her love affair was nothing more than an act of defiance or betrayal. Her search for perfect understanding and true happiness ends in despair. She tries to attain her individuality by rejecting both men. But at last she is drawn to her husband because the outer world is dangerous and is always up in arms against women who fight against oppressive forces. She is also an empowered woman in the sense that she is in command of her destiny.