Chapter VI

Summing Up

The thesis titled “From Enslavement to Empowerment: A Study of the Women Characters in the Selected Novels of Geeta Abraham Jose, Anita Nair, Arundhati Roy, Nirmala Aravind and Jaishree Misra” has attempted a study of the position of women in the Kerala society. The study has shed light on the fact that the much publicised high status of women in Kerala is only a myth, for women are still victims of subtle, diverse and powerful forms of patriarchal conditioning. An analysis of these seven novels from a feminist perspective has yielded rich dividends about the status of women from the early twentieth century to the present. The much acclaimed literacy levels of women and their employment leading to empowerment are the results of women’s constant struggle against patriarchal forces which have been pinning them down to their traditional roles.

The subordination of women is due to the rigorous and multiple operations of the politics of gender, caste, religion, cultural and social practices, including those related to marriage and family. All these five writers present the house as a symbol of ‘patriarchal enclosure’. The social and familial structures based on patriarchy expect a woman to fulfil her role as a wife and mother. All these novels could be classified as domestic novels because they depict Kerala society with its customs, manners, social structures and social, cultural and religious practices including family structure and relationships.

In The Better Man, Mukundan’s mother suffers humiliation and ill-treatment from her husband Achuthan Nair. Even though she belonged to the matrilineal joint family tradition, her condition shows that women like her were not comfortable and
safe in such an allegedly woman-friendly system. The male chauvinistic attitude of Achutan Nair makes her a victim of his cruelty.

Like many traditional Indian women, Parukutty too would have been content to perform her traditional wifely role had Achutan Nair not entered into illicit relationships. She suffered everything silently and chose to remain a meek victim of his callousness and cruelty. But the fact that she could not do anything to disrupt this unholy relationship highlights the helplessness of the women of the earlier times. But Achutan Nair’s decision to bring his concubine to their house makes the otherwise meek and submissive wife protest violently. Men who demand marital fidelity from women are least concerned about observing such qualities in their lives.

Paru Kutty is a traditional woman who attaches great sanctity to husband-wife relationship. Women’s subordination is achieved through a combination of physical violence and cultural pressure. She is a true pativrata who does not break the lakshmana rekha imposed by the custodians of patriarchal values. This attitude makes her remain a victim of her husband’s cruelty. But it is this attitude that drives her to protest against her husband’s illicit relationship with another woman and she reacts only when things become unbearable to her. She is an enslaved woman. Damayanti too is an enslaved woman who is strictly traditional in her attitude. Her husband is the most important person in her life and she does only those things which please her husband. She subsumes her identity under that of her husband. The feeling that she would never outgrow him gives him great pleasure.

Life is not a bed of roses for women of the second phase because they are torn between the values of tradition and modernity. But the women of the second phase try to question the dehumanizing practices and gender bias of our society. They value freedom and individuality and object to their confinement. Meenakshi too is a product
of gender biased society who was forced to give up her books for serving and fulfilling the interests of the family. Her confinement and boredom, coupled with patriarchal and feudal oppressions, make her join the Naxal Movement. Meenakshi, on being deserted by her husband, runs a crèche and later a shop to support herself and her child. She wants to escape the bondage of marriage which restricts her freedom and independence. Her decision to take up the post of a matron of a hostel underlines her courage and determination to assert her identity. But interestingly she does this only after fulfilling her wifely and motherly duties. She is partly enslaved and partly empowered.

Her marriage with Balan, though unsuccessful, did not dampen her spirit. His desertion drives her to live without the support of a man and she takes up different jobs to support herself and her child. But even then she proves to be a traditional wife who takes it upon herself the duty of looking after her husband when he is bedridden with tuberculosis of the spine. She decides to leave her husband and family only when they can look after themselves. She seeks freedom and independence only after fulfilling her duties. She is a representative of the second phase of women who are often torn between the restrictions of tradition and the pull of modernity.

Anjana too is steeped in gender stereotypes and her conventional upbringing makes her worship her husband even when he is callous and indifferent to her. Her husband treats her like a servant and considers her a non-entity. Like any traditional mother she too longs for a child but her wish is not fulfilled. Rejection, unreciprocated love and physical cruelty force her to break her passivity to assert her individuality. The extreme suffering and neglect experienced by her in her married life force her to erase all traces of her husband from her life. Education and her father’s support give her the much needed confidence and courage to come out of the captivity of her house and of her husband. Being an educated woman, she can stand on her own feet. She
becomes a teacher and asserts her individuality by seeking divorce to escape from this unfulfilling relationship. She thus protests against the injustice and humiliation meted out to her by her chauvinistic husband.

Valsala, wife of Prabhakarlan, is unhappy in her marital life and kills her husband with the help of her paramour Sridharan. But Valsala’s protest is unacceptable to any society. To her, their house and surroundings had become a prison keeping her captive for the last twenty-three years. Her failure to find emotional and sexual fulfillment forces her to become an accomplice in murdering her husband. She represents the type of women who choose wrong methods to liberate themselves from their unhappy marital life.

Bhasi has a happy and blissful marital life because he and his wife give importance to family relationships. Though a woman of the second phase, Damayanti is a typical traditional woman who avoids everything unpleasant and unacceptable to her husband. Her husband is the most important person in her life and she is eager to please her husband. She, being a widow, realises her precarious existence and is forced to depend on her new husband, Bhasi. She is happy to don the role of a traditional wife for whom her husband is everything. She too is an enslaved woman.

Roy’s *The God of Small Things* and Jose’s *By the River Pampa I Stood* deal with the break-down of family relationships due to various reasons. The background of Jose’s the novel is the early part of the twentieth century. References to untouchability, freedom struggle, feudal-tenant system, women’s subordination in the patriarchal set up during the period and the inability of women to come out of such a system are presented realistically in the novel. Family as an institution and familial relationships are highly valued during this period, especially among the Syrian Christians.
Jose’s novel deals with the life of Annammachi who was forced to live like a widow because she was not allowed to marry the man whom she loved just because of the fact that he belonged to an untouchable caste. Even though she crossed traditional boundaries by entering into forbidden relationships she could not marry the man she loved because of the overarching influence of her father. All she could do was to reject the alliance brought to her by her father and remain an ‘unmarried widow’ till her death. She could not break the rigid caste system and inhuman practices of the conservative society. She thus unknowingly becomes an agent to promote the family’s honour and reputation by living with her aunt during her confinement. Since she did not have complete control over her destiny she is not fully empowered but not totally enslaved either. She is a prototype of the modern woman.

Caste feelings forced the Syrian Christians of the early twentieth century from having any contact with the untouchables or converted Christians. Annamma’s decision to stay away from matrimony was a protest against her father’s decision not to have any alliance with the untouchables. But her own sister’s granddaughter violates the family codes and marries a non-Christian which is unacceptable to the tradition bound, male dominated society. Just like her grandmother’s sister, she too flouts age old conventions and traditions and reverses Do’s and Don’ts that convention demanded of her. Modern women consider tradition and ancestry trivial, and marriage for them should be a union of two people who value love and compatibility more than anything else. The man who insists on dowry more than his partner’s individuality is not acceptable to them.

The ever increasing demand for a huge dowry is characteristic of the Syrian Christian community. The novelist ridicules this craze of this community by her presentation of Unni, Mathen’s second son. According to her, he would not have
objected “even if it all had been given to him, minus the bride” (BTRPIS 61). This attitude goes unchecked even in the modern period and this is clear from the narrator’s statement that she cannot think of a marital alliance with a man who knows “nothing about me other than my name, my family name and the dowry I would bring (his price-tag!” (BTRPIS 114). She considers ancestry and tradition as something trivial. She is stubborn and adamant like her grand aunt and flouted traditions and conventions of the family and society by marrying a non-Syrian Christian who hailed from Tamil Nadu. For these women, love, emotional compatibility and self-identity are far more important than tradition or the economic status of the partner.

Even though vast changes are visible in many fields, gender bias and gender imbalance still remain dominant in this society. The attitudes of Mathen who belonged to an earlier generation as well as the attitude of the narrator’s mother who belongs to the next generation are identical. Her daughter’s marriage to a non-Christian is objected tooth and nail. But educated and independent women of the third phase, like the narrator, flout the dehumanising attitudes and practices of the patriarchal society and she marries a man of her choice unmindful of the possible changes in the family equations.

Mariamma, another daughter of Mathen, could not adjust herself to her domineering mother-in-law and ‘mama’s boy’ husband. But she shows courage to come back to her natal family after the death of her husband and never returns to her husband’s family. She is partly enslaved and partly empowered. Pushpa too, Annamma’s friend, values an individual’s freedom and rights. She discards ‘the security’ offered by matrimony. She served in the Jhansi Regiment and returns to Kuttanad to live like a spinster. Her struggle for the nation’s freedom is also symbolic of her struggle for individual freedom and autonomy. It is also indicative of the fact
that women’s participation in the freedom struggle did not improve their social conditions. Her bold decision to remain a spinster proves that she is a truly empowered woman.

*The God of Small Things* deals with the marital relationships of the people of three generations where male hegemony and androcentric power relations lead to mistrust among people resulting in the disintegration of families. Ayemenem is the locale where patriarchal structures and values subjugate people, especially women who crave for the fulfilment of their basic human rights. Like the men in *By the River Pampa I Stood*, the men in the Ayemenem family too pride their rich heritage. They fail to realize that their hypocrisy, vanity, chauvinism, cruelty and callousness towards others, especially to women in their families, have brought untold miseries to women. The portraits of Rev. E. John Ipe and his wife, Aleyooty Ammachi, on the wall are highly suggestive of the marital disharmony and discord between the two. She accepted her status in the family by conforming to social and family rules, thus succeeding in fulfilling her role as a mother and wife. She subscribed to powerful patriarchal ideologies but secretly wished for a change in her life. She is an enslaved woman of the first phase.

Pappachi, Mammachi and Baby Kochamma also follow the old value system. The relationship between Pappachi and Mammachi is not based on love and companionship. It is a relationship between the ruler and the ruled. She is a victim of physical cruelty and violence. Mammachi, consciously or unconsciously, internalizes the obnoxious patriarchal values and gender discrimination practised by our patriarchal society. Marriage gives horrible nightmarish experiences to Mammachi. She is forced to lead a miserable life and Pappachi imposes his male superiority on her by beating her savagely. She remains a traditional enslaved woman accepting her lot and restricting
her activities to her family. Even though she is a victim of male violence, she does not protest and remains a submissive wife.

Pappachi could not shed his patriarchal values and he used every method to terrorize his family members. The denial of education to Ammu and the benevolent attitude shown to Chacko prove the callousness of a system which considers a woman a non-entity. Pappachi did not allow his daughter to have the benefits of college education. Though both Ammu and Chacko are divorcees, Chacko’s physical needs are approved as man’s needs but Ammu’s needs are considered sinful and a violation of social and ethical codes.

Similarly Baby Kochamma suffers her fate in silence in a patriarchal society. Defying her father’s wishes, she goes to Madras to become a Roman Catholic nun only to get close enough to enjoy the company of Fr. Mulligan. Her father considered education something unnecessary for a girl child. The attitude that marriage is far more important for women than her education is proved by the fact that her father sends her for higher education only when she has made herself unfit for a conjugal relationship. She too accepts her destiny and remains wedded to her enslavement.

Ammu, the representative of the women of the second phase, flouts social, religious and family codes to marry a non-Christian Bengali in order to escape her imprisonment at Ayemenem. Her husband’s alcoholism coupled with his view that a woman is an object, a sexual commodity, to satisfy one’s passions force her to leave her husband. He is a symbol of mean patriarchal values which rob a woman of her dignity and selfhood. But unlike her mother, she refuses to be a silent sufferer. She divorces him but her return to Ayemenem, as a divorcee, is not happily accepted. Ammu is not like her traditional counterparts—obedient, submissive and conservative living up to the expectations and demands of a patriarchal society. She goes to the
History House to have a physical union with Velutha posing a direct challenge to the sexual norms put forward by the patriarchal society.

Her frustrated dreams, the injustice and neglect faced by her and the discrimination and hypocrisy of the patriarchal society turn her into a rebel. She flouts all conventions. She shows courage and determination to seek her livelihood when she is sent out of her natal home. The condition of a Syrian Christian woman who has been denied the right to own parental property is also brought to light through the sufferings of Ammu. She also shows courage to question the exploitative social and legal system. But she is not in command of her destiny and is not a fully empowered woman. Her inability to find a job and her death in a derelict room highlight this point.

Chacko’s failure in marriage is also ascribed to his patriarchal, male chauvinistic attitudes. His brief stint abroad makes him forget his family members. His marriage to a foreigner is a sign of changing marital alliances in the Malayalee society, especially in the Syrian Christian community. Ammu and Margaret Kochamma defy the norms and conventions of the patriarchal society. While both of them get divorced, the former crosses the limits of patriarchal sexual codes and finds sexual fulfillment in Velutha. She questions the ‘love laws’ formulated by family and society that lay down who should be loved and how much.

Rahel, the woman of the third phase, comes out of her marital relationship when she cannot tolerate her husband’s domineering nature and also because of the cultural disparity between the two. The disintegration of Ammu’s marriage has its repercussions and creates a lot of void in the lives of the next generation. Rahel’s marriage to Larry MC Caslin fails due to personal and cultural incompatibilities. She understands the futility of such a union. Indifference and listlessness mark their
married life. Thus for some modern men and women marriage is not an important social institution and they do not attach any religious or social significance to it.

Rahel, being a witness and victim of family feuds, probably believes that much cannot be expected from marriage. This makes her drift into marriage without any clear purpose and mental preparation. She, being a woman of the twenty-first century, displays exemplary boldness in handling her relationship with men and courageously moves out of the empty relationship asserting her right to determine the course of her life.

The advancement of modern education after the formation of the State in 1956 did not make drastic changes to the lives of women and they continued to remain victims of patriarchal authority. Many women of this period were deprived of the fruits of higher education. Ammu of the second phase is denied education as it would bring more liability for her parents. The migration of men to Europe and the Gulf brought ennui and boredom in the lives of many women and this also has been highlighted in the novel.

_A Video, a Fridge and a Bride_ deals with the financial difficulties and the resultant marital stress experienced by every middle class Syrian family, especially in the early eighties when their daughter was denied a good marital alliance due to their inability to provide the exhorbitant dowry demanded either by the boy or his family.

Lissy’s parents are deeply rooted in traditional values and practices and consider marital relationship for their daughter far more important than her education and employment. This attitude makes them pay attention to her culinary skills. This also makes them bring up their daughter strictly in accordance with traditional gender stereotypes.
Kuttiamma is a totally committed wife, fulfilling all her wifely and motherly duties. She inherits patriarchal values and her attitude is strictly in accordance with this gender stereotyping. She is traditional in her outlook and brings up her daughter in a traditional manner. Lissy’s friend, Suma, is a feminist. But Lissy’s mother objects to all such ‘isms’ and ‘ists’. According to her, women should not have opinions. She is engrossed in the ‘feminine mystique’ as well as ‘the domestic mystique’ and is a happily enslaved woman.

Modern men’s attitude to marriage has undergone rapid changes and is seen as a means to further their financial prospects and social status. Prospective grooms demand a huge dowry. But many modern women are willing to reject such proposals because quite a few of them are educated and employed. This gives them confidence to stand on their own feet. Lissy’s parents are worried about clinching a suitable alliance for their daughter. But Lissy objects to their move as she wants employment which would ensure her financial autonomy and self-respect. When all the grooms demand exhorbitant dowry, she is drawn to Jose, her colleague, even though there is nothing physically attractive about him. She is ready to marry a Dalit Christian despite the fact that traditional Syrian Christians would not accept such a relationship. But when she finds out the reason for Jose’s decision to have the marriage in a church for selfish reasons she boldly decides against marrying him. This is also suggestive of changes taking place in the Syrian Christian community where the young generation is least concerned about tradition and ancestry and is willing to marry even a member of a community which is traditionally considered low in status, thus destabilizing the existing hierarchial position of the community.

Modern women are willing to reject proposals from grooms who demand a huge dowry. Many of them are educated and employed like Lissy and exude confidence.
Lissy is even ready to forego marriage if she is to marry men who will give importance to money and personal advancement and not to love and companionship. Thus Lissy and Renjini are empowered women of the third phase.

Lissy’s education and a reasonable job give her the much needed self-respect and self-confidence. Her life in the women’s hostel enables her to look at her life and future from a different perspective. This, to a certain extent, deconstructs traditional patriarchal attitudes nurtured by her father and mother. Her friend Renji too is willing to remain single if she does not find the right person. She is highly critical of weak-willed women who dance to the tunes played by domineering men. This women’s group and its conscientising efforts give her the confidence to get out of her “totally conditioned” (VFB 175) nature. They succeed in liberating Lissy from the bondage of traditional values and practices which are dehumanizing.

Lissy, a modern educated woman, is thus forced to assert her independence and individuality by protesting against the patriarchal attitudes towards women and marriage. The commodification of women by the male chauvinistic society is critiqued by her. Her relationship with Jose proves that she is able to take independent decisions disregarding those thrust upon her by her parents. Her suggestion for a civil ceremony to legitimize their marriage proves this.

_Ancient Promises, Afterwards and Mistress_ are set in post-1990s Kerala and the women protagonists in these novels show remarkable courage and self-confidence. They are highly educated and show enormous confidence to challenge the patriarchal authority. They challenge gender inequality and the patriarchal biases of the society.

Janaki’s parents in _Ancient Promises_ are victims as well as perpetrators of patriarchal hegemony. They are rooted in the values and traditions of Kerala culture. 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 from a rich Maraar family, thus, abandoning her former friend Arjun because he belonged to the ‘wrong’ community. Janaki’s father, forcing her into an arranged marriage, wanted to serve and promote the patriarchal interests of the society. Her mother is a dependent on her husband and so an enslaved woman.

Though her marriage with Suresh takes place against her wish, she is ready to fulfil all expectations of the family and society in order to make their marital life a successful one. But Suresh and his mother are domineering and they use every method to control her. She experiences complete alienation and rejection when a mentally challenged daughter is born to them. The child becomes an object of ridicule and becomes the reason for confining herself to the house. 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 flees with Arjun, her former lover, to find a job in England.

Janaki’s parents led an exemplary married life and the case of her maternal uncle is not something different. All of them consider marriage and marital relationships quite valuable and make compromises and adjustments for a healthy marital life. Traditonal values and native cultural practices strongly influence their decisions. They also value a good marital alliance for a woman more than her education and independence. So they force them to arrange a marital alliance for Janaki bringing her academic pursuits an end to and thereby her chances of realizing her full potential as an independent human being.

But the incompatibility with her husband and his hegemonic attitudes lead to the destruction of her married life. The indifference and the callousness of her husband force her to assert her individuality. Though she becomes a victim of her mother-in-
law’s cruel jibes and domineering nature, she musters up courage to fulfil her needs and wishes. Traditional patriarchal upbringing forces a woman not to question the authority and decisions of her husband and parents, including parents-in-law. But Janaki’s suffering and her exposure to western values and notions of freedom strengthen her to question the unjust practices and attitudes of her in-laws, thus making her an empowered woman. Her decision to fight single-handedly against all kinds of oppression, including her exclusion from social gatherings, proves that she is a representative of the new generation of empowered women. Her decision to find her own ways of dealing with her problems in life and her determination to fight against all kinds of oppressions portray her as a bold woman. She does not run away from life but faces the realities of life. When she realises that a decent respectable position in life is far away from reality she decides to go with Arjun, her one time friend and classmate.

Janaki’s loss of freedom and individuality, which a woman in the previous generation would have ignored, forces her to seek something better. She cannot subsume or merge her identity with that of her husband. Divorce is not seen by modern women as a loss of freedom and identity; it is seen as an assertion of their identity and freedom.

The change from the matrilineal to patrilineal system is evident in the novel. The superior status enjoyed by women in the matrilineal Nair tradition is a thing of the past. Janaki is aware of the disadvantage of a nuclear family which is characterized by the absence of a network of relationship and friendship. But a joint family system too can be intimidating if such a family lacks camaraderie and is impelled by the motive to crush one’s individuality and independence.

Like Ammu in *The God of Small Things* and Janaki in *Ancient Promises*, Maya in *Afterwards* is forced to give up her academic pursuits to enter into an arranged
marriage fixed by her parents. The novel also speaks of the marumakkathayam system of inheritance practised earlier and the gradual shift to makkathayam.

Pulayil Varmas were deeply rooted in patriarchal values which make them insensitive to the needs and rights of women. Maya’s decision to defy age-old conventions and practices by running away with another man is unacceptable and unimaginable to her parents. Hence they perform her death rites three years before her actual death. Varma was a staunch exponent of cultural ethos and patriarchal values, and Maya’s mother was a mere shadow in his presence. She blindly followed or was forced to accept her husband’s decisions and never questioned his decisions even if they went against the interests of other members.

Maya musters up courage to cast away a tormenting relationship, unmindful of the consequences. She is unmindful of social conventions, public censure and familial and cultural traditions and throws away the marital bond that chains her to this system. She suffers everything like a faithful and submissive wife. But when her suffering becomes unbearable, she takes the bold step to get out of this strained relationship.

In Mistres, Sethu, Shyam’s father, never married. 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 a marriage of this nature. Radha’s father had attached a lot of importance to societal values and found happiness in conforming to social values. Radha’s paternal uncle considers a woman a sexual object and does not want to be trapped in a marriage. Her father, a supporter of patriarchy, held values that were contrary to the values of her daughter. The novel depicts the subordinate condition of women in our society.

Mistress depicts the fractured life of Radha and Shyam. Shyam considers his wife a possession. But she does not want to be confined within the four walls of the
house. Her unhappiness and loneliness in her marital life are the result of his utter disregard for her feelings and wishes. The conflict between traditional and modern values is evident in Radha. Even though like any traditional Indian woman she swore that she would never transgress the rules of custom and tradition when she married Shyam, she pays the least regard for convention and honour, and this is proved by her relationship with Chris and her earlier relationship with a married man who was a senior manager in the company where she worked. Radha is least worried about what people would think about her conduct. Radha challenges patriarchal norms by indulging in a sexual relationship with another man. She wants to express her defiance against androcentric social norms by indulging in adulterous relationships. She has the courage to stand by her own conviction and take her own decisions.

Radha’s rejection of both Shyam and Chris is suggestive of her assertion to lead an independent life without the support of both men. To her, both stand for values and principles which crush a woman’s desire for freedom and independence. She tries to attain her individuality by rejecting both men.

Twentieth century witnessed a lot of changes. The feudal-tenant system which helped many Syrian Christians to consolidate their power and property gave way to a more egalitarian, democratic set-up due to educational, social and political changes. The vast employment opportunities in the Gulf brought about a lot of changes in family and society. The nouveau rich brought a lot of attitudinal changes in the society. The importance given to money made them believe that they can buy tradition and husbands for their daughters. This also sounded the death-knell of the feudalistic system. The upward mobility of the middle and the lower classes, thanks to the chances offered by the Gulf boom, altered the social structure of Kerala society.
If women of the first phase like Paru Kutty and Mammachi were victims of physical cruelty, women of the modern period too are victims of neglect and rejection. Janaki in *Ancient Promises* and Maya in *Afterwards* are denied access to education and jobs, and Radha in *Mistress*, though educated, is denied employment. All of them are confined to the four walls of the house. Govind is suspicious which forces her to withdraw from everyone. Likewise, Radha in *Mistress* is being constantly watched by her husband. Janaki and Maya also are not allowed to go for shopping and are denied access to public spaces. Maya is not allowed even to meet her friends except visit her parents.

All the five women writers present the house as a cage for women. Janaki, looking at the caged birds at Sathi’s house, compares her own and her daughter’s predicament with those of the caged birds. Maya too is of the opinion that a good house is like a good cage for a woman in a patriarchal set-up. An individual’s loss of freedom in this beautiful cage is sheer torture for her. Her confinement becomes complete when she is jobless and is denied access to public spaces. In *Mistress* too the predicament of women is compared to the predicament of the caged bird, Malini, at Shyam’s sister’s house. The caged bird stands for Radha in particular and women in general.

These five novelists present men as weaker than women. Nair presents many of her women characters as stronger than men. Characters like Meeenakshi, Anjana and Valsala are shown to grow in strength and courage with their suffering. As long as Paru Kutty is alive, she never allows Achuthan Nair to bring his concubine to her house. Anjana is stronger than Mukundan and “All through their relationship, she had been the one to take risks, to forge ahead while he had walked a step behind, afraid, unsure” (TBM 355). Anjana tells Mukundan, “You are a coward. A smug and
completely self-absorbed coward who puts himself before anyone else and then uses his own feebleness of character to excuse it . . . You disgust me” (TBM 323). Mukundan shows manly qualities very late in life. The community hall built by Power House Ramakrishnan turns out to be a symbol of his failure. He realises that it was “a statement of his weakness, his cowardice, and his lack of integrity . . . His failure as a friend, as a lover. As a man” (TBM 356).

Ravindran is a failure in his Agarbarti business. Balan and Achuthan Nair long for the companionship of their wives when they are physically weak. Prabhakaran is physically weak and incapable of fathering a child.

Chacko in *The God of Small Things* is a failure in all respects. Even though he migrates to Canada for better prospects, nothing successful happens in his life and he runs an unsuccessful antique business. To Mammachi, Chacko is brilliant and has all the qualities necessary to rule even a nation. But to Ammu if a person cannot run even a pickle factory profitably how can that person run a country. In fact, he is responsible for ruining the profitable small scale pickle industry which had been successfully run by Mammachi where she was a partner only in name. Chacko’s failure to protect his business and his family property is, in fact, suggestive of the failure of patriarchal authority which uses violence rather than individual ability to consolidate its power. His failure is complete when he is forced to sell off his rice fields to pay off his bank loans and for buying provisions for the family. By selling the family property, which, to a Syrian Christian, is the symbol of his rich tradition and patriarchal power, Chacko unconsciously aids in dismantling such power structures. His “slack, womanish legs” and “his father’s effeminate pout” (TGST 51) also indicate the absence of manly qualities.
While Lissy in *A Video, a Fridge, and a Bride* becomes a determined and practical woman, her brother, Aby, in whom the family has placed all their hopes, turns inept and forgets his academic and family responsibilities for religious pursuits. He withdraws from people and life.

When Suresh in *Ancient Promises* runs away from family responsibilities without taking care of the disabled child it is Janaki who courageously braves all odds to find ways to bring normality to the child. When compared to Maya, Govind in *Afterwards* is not quite communicative. He is full of conservative beliefs and is uncomfortable with western customs and practices. Shyam in *Mistress* is presented as one without any virility.

All the novels of the third phase refer to patriarchy’s use of various techniques and strategies to control women. It uses traditional methods such as intimidation and physical assault as well as modern techniques such as pretension of love or branding somebody as mad to subjugate women.

The majority of these characters, whether they belong to the first, second or third phase, attach a lot of importance to healthy man-woman relationships. But the husband-wife relationship that existed in traditional marital arrangements is discarded by many women of the third phase. To them, it was like the relationship that existed between the ruler and the ruled. Paru Kutty, Annamachi, Mammachi, Janaki’s mother and women of the second phase like Damayanti, Anjana, Saramma, Kuttiamma and women of the third phase like Lissy, Janaki, Maya and Radha value man-woman relationship. But they value relationships based on equality and companionship. The women of the third phase are ready to fight for equality and assert their identity in man-woman relationships.
The characters in these novels value love marriages more than arranged marriages. Marriages arranged by parents often attach unnecessary importance to family status and honour, dowry, family property and wealth and a variety of other factors which are supposed to bring fame and honour to both families but often neglect the genuine needs of individuals, especially women. Thus Annammachi prefers an untouchable to a doctor arranged by her father. The unnamed narrator in *By The River Pampa I Stood* marries the man whom she loved rather than the doctor arranged for her by her father. Janaki in *Ancient Promises*, Maya in *Afterwards* and Radha in *Mistress* are forced to enter into marriages arranged by their parents but these alliances land them in total desperation. Janaki and Maya live happily when they marry the men of their choice and Radha is confident and comfortable in the company of Shyam. If the women of the first phase accepted marital alliances even if they were enslaving many women of the second phase wished for a change. They tried to question the inhuman practices and gender bias of our society. They value freedom and individuality and object to their confinement. But there are also women like Damayanti and Kuttiamma who are quite traditional. This proves that traditional as well as modern liberal values co-existed during the second phase which was a transitional phase.

Women of the third phase were concerned with freedom and independence. Rahel, Lissy, Janaki, Maya, and Radha try to assert their identity. They throw away tormenting relationships or even run away with men of their choice to lead a life of their own. The exception is Lissy. But she is ready to marry only that man who would value her as a person. The unnamed narrator in *By the River Pampa I Stood* marries a non-Syrian Christian because she finds in him a true partner. Janaki and Maya who accepted the decisions of their parents come out of their marriage and marry the men they loved.
The majority of the women in these novels value friendship in relationship. Family honour and tradition are rejected for a healthy, sharing relationship. Caste, class, creed and language do not become barriers to such relationships. Annammachi of the first phase, Ammu of the second phase and Lissy, Janaki, Maya and Radha of the third phase ignore customs and practices based on tradition and are ready to enter into relationships with men even if their background is different from theirs.

The slavery or dependence of women on men was mainly due to two reasons. One was the patriarchal attitudes and practices of men and the other was women’s lack of financial independence. Wherever women lacked education and employment, they had to depend on men. Paru Kutty, Saramma, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, and Rukmani Amma, the main characters of the first phase, do not have financial autonomy. Women of the second phase too do not have much freedom but in contrast to the women of the first phase they realise that financial autonomy is essential for the achievement of their identity. So Meenakshi, Anjana, Ammu, through their sufferings, realise that they can lead an independent life only if they have financial independence. The women of the third phase are aware that their identity depends on their position in the family and society, and so Lissy, Janaki, Maya and Radha vehemently defend their right to get employment and all of them, except Radha, succeed sooner or later. Their education and employment give them a lot of confidence and they realize that education is a means to liberate them from the clutches of patriarchal authority. Some of them show a remarkable insight in choosing career-oriented education. Janaki, even though she has completed MA English, takes a course in special education. Maya studies interior design; Rahel studies Architecture; and Lissy attends bank coaching.

Another common feature of these novels is that mothers knowingly or unknowingly collude with patriarchal forces to shatter the dreams of their daughters.
Mammachi and Baby Kochamma in *The God of Small Things* lock Ammu in her room and brand her a mad woman for her relationship with Velutha. Janaki was not welcomed by her mother when she announced her decision to divorce her husband. Instead, she was sent back with lot of advice. Maya’s mother joins her husband in performing her death rites even before her actual death for violating the social and family codes. Radha’s sister-in-law, Rani Oppol, robs Radha of her self-esteem and leaves her totally worthless.

The husbands of the women of the third phase view women as objects and fail to identify them as persons. This attitude was there even during the first and second phases but becomes glaring in the third phase. To Achuthan Nair, his wife does not arouse any sexual interest whereas his concubine Ammini fulfils all his sexual needs. Ravindran uses Anjana for his sexual gratification. Baba asks Ammu to gratify the sexual needs of his boss to protect his job. Radha feels that for both Shyam and Chris a woman is an object of sexual gratification. Shyam uses Radha as an object and rapes her to prove that he has control over her body.

A study of these women characters shows that they are oppressed by multiple factors like denial of love, callous and indifferent treatment by their husbands, their suspicious nature, denial of proper space to develop their individual identities, denial of education, employment, and financial independence, denial of public space and denial of authentic and autonomous existence. More than physical hardships, these women are subjected to psychological oppression. All the five novelists vehemently attack the dehumanising practices in patriarchal institutions like marriage and family and highlight the bitter fact that the condition of women in God’s Own Country is not healthy.