Chapter I

Introduction

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” proposes to analyse the novels of these five Malayalee women writers in English from a feminist perspective with a view to analyzing the status of Malayalee women in their family and society from the early twentieth century to the present. The project seeks to deconstruct the myth circulated by the patriarchal society that women of Kerala have achieved enviable progress in many fields and their marginalisation and oppression have given way to a golden period in modern times.

The study is aimed at underscoring the fact that the various patriarchal hegemonies of the earlier period which controlled and enslaved women are ruthlessly practised today through varied institutions. Hence, women of today are forced to adopt various methods and modes of resistance unlike the women of the earlier period in order to liberate themselves from their painful predicament.

The researcher has chosen these five Malayalee women novelists in English because they are all concerned about the position of Malayalee women and the functioning of the family in a rigid patriarchal set-up. All the seven novels chosen for this project were originally written in English and are not translations. Besides, these writers have the double advantage of being an insider and an outsider at the same time, and this naturally helps them to look at these institutions in a more objective manner.

Fiction by women writers contributes a major part of the contemporary Indian writing in English. Among other issues, it helps us to understand social evils, the power struggles in the society and the excruciating experiences of women and also
envision ways of counteracting those prejudices and attitudes. Various women characters in these novels reel under the pressure of the patriarchal system, and take often the position of “outsiders” to attack the ideologies that come in their way of becoming free individuals. The consanguine and contractual relationships which are often governed by patriarchal attitudes have been examined in this thesis to study the nature of family relationships in Kerala.

In the galaxy of Indian women novelists in English, Malayee women writers shine by their portrayal of the existential predicament of women in a male dominated society governed by rigid traditions and patriarchal restrictions. These women novelists have given authentic literary representations of their experiences by dwelling deep into the recesses of their repressed women.

Malayalee writing in English shot into prominence with the publication of Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* which bagged the prestigious Booker Prize in 1997. Ever since its global acceptance, there has been a demand for the works written by Malayalee writers in English and women writers like Jaishree Misra and Anita Nair ascended the literary scene and achieved fame and recognition. Most readers, especially the Westerners, are fascinated by the regional elements in these novels and the state of Kerala has been put on the fictional map by these women writers. All these novels could be classified as domestic novels because they deal with the condition of women in their families. The researcher, being a Malayalee himself, is in an advantageous position to look deeply into all these aspects in these novels and the thesis thus becomes in part a cultural study of Kerala as well.


Nirmala Aravind was born into a Syrian Christian family of Central Travancore in 1957. She grew up in Kolar Gold Fields, the mining town in Karnataka and returned
to Kerala in 1972. She is a banker by profession. *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride*, published in 1995, is her only novel.

Geeta Abraham Jose is a Post-Graduate in the field of Electronics and Communication Engineering from the Indian Institute of Technology, Madras. She has published a number of poems and articles in various magazines. She grew up in Hyderabad and Kerala. She now lives in Dubai. Her only novel *By the River Pampa I Stood* was published in 2007.

A survey of research works carried out in this field has revealed that some research projects have already been done on Arundhati Roy’s novels based on the themes of social realism, social consciousness, casteism, politics, feminist consciousness and the position and marginalisation of women. Comparative studies of Roy and Anita Desai and a few comparative studies of Roy with other non-Malayalee writers have also been undertaken. Themes such as filial relationship, the rise of the New Woman, cultural uprootedness, and women’s experiences in family have been analysed with reference to Misra’s works. The theme of man-woman relationship, eco-feminism, the female phase, patriarchy and women are the main themes taken up for analysis in Nair’s works. Aravind’s novel has been analysed on the basis of the Christian practices described in it. No study has been undertaken so far on the novel by Geeta Abraham Jose. Besides, no comprehensive study has so far come up on these seven novels.

The novels taken for study include Jose’s *By The River Pampa I Stood*, Nair’s *The Better Man and Mistress*, Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, Aravind’s *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride*, and Misra’s *Ancient Promises* and *Afterwards*. All the seven novels chosen for this study deal with the status of women in their families from the early twentieth century to the present.
Meena Alexander and Susan Visvanathan, though both of them are Malayalee women novelists in English, have not been included in this study for two reasons. Meena Alexander is the author of *Nampally Road*. The novel is set in Kerala and Hyderabad. It is a portrait of India after 25 years of independence. She has shown the deterioration on the personal and political areas of life. But it does not discuss the status of Malayalee women in their families and in the larger society. Her other work *Fault Lines* is a memoir.

Susan Visvanathan is the author of *Something Barely Remembered, Visiting Moon, Prosperous and Stone* and *Seine at Noon*. The only work that has Kerala background is *Something Barely Remembered*. But it is a collection of fifteen short stories and not a full-length novel. Therefore, this work has been left out and the author has not been included.

An understanding of the social, cultural and economic changes in twentieth-century Kerala is essential to analyse these novels from a feminist perspective, for these works talk about the position of twentieth-century women in their families and societies. Based on women’s status and position in the family and society and their struggle for emancipation, the twentieth century could be roughly divided into three phases. The first phase starts with the Renaissance Movement in Kerala in the early twentieth century and ends with the Independence of India in 1947. The second phase starts after Independence and ends by 1990. The third phase begins after 1990, a period marked by drastic changes in society due to the rapid spread of women’s education, globalization, growth of media and modernisation.

The first phase of women’s liberation movements in Kerala is closely connected with the Renaissance. The Renaissance in Kerala society is closely related to the anti-caste, anti-feudalistic and anti-colonial agitations which began in the latter
half of the nineteenth century and swept Kerala in the early twentieth century. One cannot ignore the role played by Renaissance values in the formation of modern Kerala. Religious and social leaders like Sri Chattampiswamikal, Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, Mannathu Padmanabhan and great poets like Kumaranasan, Vallathol and Ulloor attacked evil social practices like untouchability through their teachings and writings. Chattampiswamikal attacked caste superiority through his *Vedadhikaranirupanam* and exposed the hollowness of the Brahmin ideology that only members of the higher caste can read and interpret scriptures.

The various anti-caste protests held during the Renaissance period gradually led to a lot of changes in the social practices of the period. The seeds of inter-caste marriages were sown in the early twentieth century by Sree Narayana Guru who advocated inter-caste marriages as the best means for evolving a casteless society. According to him, education could pave the way for social and economic advancement. The social reform movements of the twentieth century led to the Temple Entry Proclamation by Maharaja Sri Chithira Tirunal of Travancore, the Temple Entry Proclamation of the Cochin Raja in 1947 and the Madras Temple Entry Act (1947). Even then education was denied to *Ezhava* girls as the government turned a deaf ear to their demands. The changes were slow but they could not be ignored.

During this period the living conditions of most women were pathetic. Women who belonged to certain castes were even deprived of their basic right to cover their breasts, violation of which was considered indecent and immoral. According to Jeffrey, “The Nayar girl was taught to bare her breasts as a mark of respect before such incarnate deities (i.e., Brahmins), her greatest pleasure should be giving pleasure to them” (*Decline of Nayar Dominance* 12). The morality of the earlier period stood in sharp contrast to the morality of the modern times.
Kerala witnessed a lot of protests against this practice and *Channar* women’s decision to cover their breasts, as was the practice with the Christian women, led to *Channar* mutiny. *Kallumala strike* by Pulaya women was similar to the *Channar* mutiny. ‘Breast-Cloth Disturbances’ of Thiruvitamkoor by the *Channar* caste women and the *Kallumala* strike by Pulaya women were open attacks against the attitudes of the upper classes in controlling women’s behavior, including their dress code. The attempts of the Christian missionaries to impart liberal education did not make any significant changes in the lives of the untouchables and women as caste practices were deeply rooted in the minds of people. According to C.J. Issac, “The activities of the Christian missionaries only helped them to read and write and did not empower the weaker sections of the society” (896).

Inter-dining and inter-caste marriages were against caste principles and were strictly observed. The obsolete and irrational social practices like *Talikettukalyanam*, *Tirandukuli* (puberty rites) and *Pulikudi* which prevailed among Hindu and Ezhava communities led to their economic impoverishment and social reformers like Sree Narayana Guru gradually persuaded the Ezhavas to give up these irrational practices. “It was unthinkable formerly for girls to continue their schooling after puberty, but then, neither was female education so common” (Puthenkalam 63). Polyandry, polygamy and *Marumakkathayam* also lost their popular appeal. The eldest male members from Nambootiri families alone could marry Nambootiri women and after the death of their husbands they were forced to live like spinsters as widow remarriages were not very common in those times.

Social reformers fought against evil practices like chid marriage and *smarthavicharam*. Among the Nambootiri community, *smarthavicharam* was the custom of dismissing a woman from her community if she was found guilty of sexual
charges. The Nambootiri men who enjoyed unrestricted sexual freedom were not willing to grant the same to their female counterparts. *Yogakshema Sabha* was formed in 1910 in order to reform the Nambootiri community and make them humane. The Nair Service Society (NSS) and, before it, the *Nayar Samajam* started by C. Krishna Pillai were responsible to a large extent for these reforms.

The marital relationship that existed among the Nairs in Kerala was known as *sambandham* and it dates back to the sixteenth century. Nambootiri *sambandhams* and widow remarriages showed the colonial family values of those days. This period also witnessed attempts to do away with feudalistic practices. Barbossa and Buchanan who visited Kerala during the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries respectively record that rich Nair women considered it a privilege to have relationships with as many Brahmins and Kshatriyas as possible. After *talikettu* (a form of marriage), a Nair is considered an object to give pleasure to the Brahmins and Naduvazhis. According to Elangulam P. Kunjan Pillai, the edict of Venmani Naduvazhi is an example. He writes, “Those women who do not yield to the desires of men who belong to their own caste or above their caste should be killed” (161).

This type of marital alliance made many outsiders believe that women were the public property of men. The custom of sharing one’s wife with one’s brothers was not considered immoral and a wife thus became an object to satisfy the sexual desires of other men in the family. The women of the early twentieth century did not consider this a disgrace or dishonour to their womanhood. The myth that Nairs are the descendents of a sect of women prostitutes brought to Kerala by its mythical founder Parusuraman to satisfy the sexual urges of high caste Brahmins is found in *Keralamahalmyam*. Nair women considered it a privilege and honour to have relationships with Nambootiris and the demand to enforce chastity on Nair women was
viewed as injustice by some. Adharvavedham points out that if a woman has ten husbands and if one among them is a Brahmin, that Brahmin should be given priority in such relationships. So the ideology and practice prevalent in this early period show that women did not have an independent status and were often used as objects of pleasure by people belonging to higher castes.

The earlier movements failed to address basic issues such as the subordination of women within the family as these movements were mainly issue-based. Women were treated as objects and marriage was considered women’s destiny in the absence of sambandham. Women’s liberation during this period was mainly related to various attempts at reforming caste, class and family. It was reformative but there was little liberation. They fought against various injustices against women but did not question the patriarchal attitude of sidelining women by denying them their right to equal share of the paternal property.

Many women like Thottakkad Ikkavamma, K. Saraswathiamma, Lalithambika Antharjanam, Balamaniamma and Nilamboor Ayisha, through their contribution in diverse fields, performed the function of leading women forward. Their attempts were aimed at making women visible and make others listen to them. They tried to form a new woman known as ‘Malayalee woman’ with her own individuality who can rise to the status of a citizen. The oppressive caste system had gradually given way to a new vision of gender relations according to which men occupied the public domain and women the domestic domain, exercising different sets of authority.

A clear distinction between the public and the private was also clearly visible throughout Keralam by the end of the nineteenth century. Modern education, aimed at refining women’s inherent capacities, was also instrumental in shaping modern public-oriented male subjects and modern domestic-oriented female subjects, leading to the
formations of new identities as well. These community movements pressurized the state in Kochi and Tiruvitamkoor to substantially ‘modernise’ family and inheritance practices. By undoing traditional family arrangements, it also instituted new forms of family and female domesticity.

Another significant change that occurred during this period was the shift in the system of inheritance from matrilineal (marumakkathayam) to patrilineal (makkathayam) systems. Some historians argue that the matrilineal system, though it did not afford effective property rights to women, had its own gains like greater sexual choice, security, positive attitude towards girl children and familial or kinship identities. If a Syrian Christian woman feels that she is being plucked away and rooted in an alien soil, such a feeling of fractured identity was absent for a woman in a matrilineal group. Since they enjoyed their maintenance and residence rights in their natal homes, it gave a lot of psychological advantages to women.

The change from marumakkathayam to makkathayam led to a low incidence of polyandry but at the same time weakened the position of women in the family. New forms of patriarchies began to be shaped by the arrival of modernity. Patrifocal family forms, disinherition of women, child mariage, priority to marriage than to women’s higher education leading to the domestication of women, observance of rigid caste system, gender division of labour, unequal division of labour and many other social structures have made the status of women pathetic. Thus a process of genderisation gradually took place within the family and women were subjected to severe restrictions and disempowerment. They failed to question the exploitative elements inherent in the institution of family.

Various legislations were passed in order to change the condition of women. The Second Nair Act of 1925 declared polyandry illegal. Nambooriris, Christians,
Ezhavas and a sizable section among the Muslims practised *makkathayam* whereas Nairs, Ambalavasis among the Hindus and Koyas from Islam practised *marumakkathayam*. Almost all protests within these communities were mainly for reforming the family system. Thus the two pillars of patriarchy—the system of male lineage of identification of generations and male lineage of inheritance of property—replaced *marumakkathayam*. This strengthened the public-domestic divide and denied women direct access to material wealth and resources and weakened their position in the family.

Even though Gandhiji believed that women’s vocation was family life, he encouraged women’s participation in public life without disrupting their familial obligations. He was of the opinion that women should not present themselves as pleasing objects to men. During the freedom struggle women came out in large numbers as their men were in jail and took charge of the freedom struggle. Women were greatly inspired by Gandhiji who saw women as autonomous, independent people. He told them that they must no longer be “dolls and objects of indulgence” but rather “comrades in common service” with their husbands. This led to a large scale public visibility of women during the freedom struggle as against their confinement in their private domestic spaces. But even their participation in freedom struggle did not help them to improve their situation at home.

O. Chundumenon’s *Indulekha* (1889) can be seen as a proof of the various social and cultural changes that took place in the Nair community in the early twentieth century. Women were considered objects to satisfy the sexual urges of men and as in the feudal system they were subservient to men, especially their husbands. But the love between Madhavan and Indulekha was modern romantic love. This helped them to break the rules and conventions of the joint family system, choosing a new family
arrangement known as the nuclear family system. The English education helped
Indulekha to become a modern housewife fit enough to meet the demands of city life.

The second phase (1947-1990) which begins after Independence was a time when progressive ideals, especially due to the spread of education, gradually began to hit Malayalee consciousness. Missionaries criticized various practices like untouchability, unapproachability, sexual immorality, hierarchies based on caste and entrenched power structures of the society. The formation of the State in 1956 led to the greater involvement of the State and other educational agencies in the field of education. Even the greater involvement of women in ‘Liberation Struggle’ (Vimochana Samaram 1959) launched against the first democratically elected Communist government and the advantages of modern education did not bring good cheers to women. Women who came out to the public space were either ignored or called back to their families to perform their familial duties. This period witnessed the advent of modernism. Women’s issues and concerns were not seriously discussed or taken up even during this period. Women once again went back to the confines of their families.

During this phase, the male bias stood against women’s employment and empowerment and the ‘feminine mystique’ taught them that they were essentially wives and mothers, trapping them in domestic responsibilities and obligations. Family, the unchanged bastion of patriarchy during this modernist period, continued to demand bonded labour of women in the private domain. The nuclear family’s construction of feminine ideal and normative femininity denied women their identity and naturalizing stereotypes seemed to be the norm. The process of democratization and modernization could not do away with this stereotyping syndrome including the myth and mystique of this image. The erasing of all caste/community markers into one standardized
masculinity and femininity confirmed women’s gendered burdens and spatial confinement to the home. At the same time, women’s role cannot be ignored in the furtherance and transmission of these age-old distinctions.

Thoppil Bhasi’s historic play *Ningal Enne Communist Aakki (You Made Me a Communist)* (1952) helped popularize the communist movement in Kerala and created an immense mass movement for a socialist society based on egalitarian and secular values. The play depicts the bold steps taken by women to weed out evils like feudalism, casteism and sexism. Even then women characters were presented as dutiful daughters, chaste wives, and loving mothers. According to Meena T. Pillai, the participation of the women of the period in the political parties and structures was very crucial but society found that “they are to be groomed to rise to social imperatives while at the same time preserving their feminine ‘ideal’ within the private domain” (Pillai 19). According to her, this “feminine mystique” and its operations ensured women’s bonded labour in the private domain.

The advancement of modern education did not bring about drastic changes in Kerala society and family as many educated women could not get suitable employment because of the male bias against women’s empowerment. Besides, men wanted their wives to look after the needs of their family members.

The nuclear family, though it liberated women from the drudgery of the joint family system, forced them to restrict themselves to the four walls of the house as their presence in the family was essential to serve their employed husbands and look after the educational needs of their children. Many women of this period were deprived of the fruits of higher learning and this lack of education resulted in the feelings of guilt and absence of self-esteem in women.
The shift from the joint family to the nuclear family was also the result of the family planning initiatives undertaken by the Central Government in the seventies. But as early as 1950, Malayee society seems to have accepted the nuclear family form. Thus the father as the chief breadwinner and the mother as the internal supervisor gained greater velocity during this period. Modern education, aimed at refining women’s inherent capacities, was also instrumental in shaping modern public-oriented male subjects and modern domestic-oriented female subjects.

The strong intervention of the State and the presence of community movements led to great changes in social and family practices. The process of reform of families leading to legislation in the first half of the twentieth century established the basis of patrifocal families in Kerala. Thus the patrifocal family, i.e. family promoting the interests of men like patrifocal residence, patrilineal descent and patrilineal inheritance and succession, began to profoundly affect women’s lives. They also began to realise that in order to get freedom and independence as individuals, they have to go in search of jobs.

Women protested against this confinement and some of the plays written during this period exhort women to come out of their family confinement and gender subordination to enjoy the fruits of freedom and independence. After a series of plays like *Adukkalayilninnum Arangathekkku (From Kitchen to Stage)*, *Ritumati*, *Marakkudakkullile Mahanarakam (The Great Hell behind Cudgon Umbrella)*, Antharjana Samajam produced *Thozhil Kendrathilekku (To Job Centres)*. It was a proclamation that Antharjanams were coming out of their family circles to enjoy the fruits of independence. The romantic concept of love not only energised them to challenge the worn-out practices found in religion, caste and class but also enabled them to reform man-woman relationship. Thus we see that second phase was marked
by women’s greater confinement and gender subordination. Women exhibiting agency and autonomy were censured and portrayed as undesirable in a patrilineal/patrifocal family.

The Syrian Christians of Kerala were greatly influenced by the Western form of patriarchy which is a direct legacy of Judaeo-Christian ideology. This ideology is based on the concept of a single male god who is the source of all authority and power. This is quite evident from the power and authority a father wields in the family. The Syrian Christian women of the early period were given a paltry amount as their share in the paternal property. The Travancore Act of 1916 had fixed at one fourth the son’s share or five thousand rupees, whichever was less, for a daughter, in the event of a father dying intestate.

The payment of stridhanam for a Christian woman is a virtual severing of ties with her family, church and friendship groups. According to Eapen and Kodoth, with marriage, a Christian woman’s “affiliation is to her husband’s family. She is not ‘fully’ incorporated, by which we mean that she is not incorporated with rights comparable to that of her husband. Rather she is incorporated distinctly as a wife, which is to say that she does not even have control over her stridhanam, not to speak of a substantial right in her husband’s family property” (15-16).

In the Hindu community, the traditional view of a daughter as paraya dhan (someone else’s wealth) and the coming of a bride into her new family as the coming of Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth, prove that the wealth brought by the woman was taken as stridhanam. But the subsequent disinheritance of women made many parents look at them as liabilities. So kanyadhanam, the gift given to a daughter, was seen as a means to get rid of a burden and a groom without a price tag was considered worthless. She ceases to be an asset in the absence of vast agricultural land and becomes a
liability. Even when she is married she does not inherit any property from her husband because a woman inherits more often as widows than as daughters and wives. To Kishwar, “The roots of her insecurity lie in her fragile rights in her natal family” (27).

Though The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 was amended by the Parliament in 1984 and revised in 1986, the practice goes on unchecked.

Keralites began to migrate to the Gulf in the early 1970s due to the oil boom and economic activities related to it. But the majority of the female emigrants were those accompanying their spouses rather than going for employment. The chances in the health sector in the Gulf countries made some women undertake nursing and other paramedical jobs. But these women had no power over their salaries as their fathers or husbands were the custodians of the money they earned.

It was in the 1970s that a clarion call was made by women’s movements to reform the laws on rape. The feminist journal *Manushi*, started in 1979, was an important voice for the emerging movement. It played a pioneering role in bringing women’s issues to the forefront of intellectual and political discourse. This was followed in the 1980s by engaging with issues such as dowry, female foeticide, domestic violence and occupational segregation. These issues were raised targeting not just the law but attacking the patriarchal ideologies of these institutions. The eighties also witnessed the emergence of women’s groups like *Prajodhana* and *Bodhana*.

During the third phase which starts from 1990s rapid socio-economic changes brought about tremendous changes in the constitution of female subjectivity. Feminist groups were formed in the mid-1980s. Women began to question capitalistic, patriarchal and neo-conservative attitudes which became the norm of the patriarchal society. With the inflow of Gulf money, consumerism became the hallmark of a Malayalee and it brought with it the objectification and commodification of women as
This consumerist culture is articulated in terms of ‘wine, women and cars’ and they became the markers of his identity and masculininity. This period witnessed the emergence of a strong gendered perspective with earlier hierarchies re-emerging in more diverse ways. The promises of an egalitarian family life became a sweet male deception and women were being increasingly overshadowed by the strong male presence. This led to women becoming aggressive and assertive, and family became a crucial site for the radical disavowal of stereotypical constructions. Crisis arose in family and society when gendered individuals transgressed these limits. The post-1990s are also noted for their transgressive feminine sexuality.

By the 1990s the nuclear family becomes the only solace for an individual who is torn asunder by the forces of liberalization. The failure of the nuclear family to provide succour to the disempowered people led to an insecurity feeling among all, especially women. The ephemerality and shakiness of existing family structures began to be felt more intensely in the 90s. The post-1990 also saw the flowering of misogyny and this is clear from the many rape cases reported from the length and breadth of the state. The phase 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.

Women began to distrust the concept of equality during this period. They doubted the sincerity and the efforts initiated by the patriarchal society in the achievement of gender equality. The various attempts to abolish caste and class differences did not emphasize gender equality. Women began to question the old concept–personal is not political–and believed that personal is indeed political. Feminist ideas coming in from the West strengthened their stance and many women’s movements and feminist writers openly challenged the inhuman practices in the family and society, registering their unease with modern domesticity.
During this time various changes across the globe, including postmodern tendencies and values, began to have their influences on Keralites. It was a period which witnessed the proclamation of the identities of suppressed groups like dalits, adivasis and women. During this period women began to assert their identity in terms of nation, religion, class and caste.

The proliferation of nuclear families during the second and third phases aggravated the pitiable condition of women. Women’s roles and responsibilities in the family had undergone considerable changes. An employed woman was burdened with career and family responsibilities. Many educated women were also prevented from seeking employment as it was feared that these women would alter gender equations.

Women, marginalised for a long time, began to revolt against life-negating principles of all institutions. The traditional values inculcated at home and the progressive ideas they came into contact with at the higher centres of learning often led to clashes between the old and the new generations. The new generation had the courage and confidence to question inequalities in family and society. An emerging woman, aware of her potentials, wanted to break free from traditional practices.

Atrocities against women assumed dangerous proportions during this period. “Objectification and commodification become the norm and are staged as much on the female body as any other ‘commodity’ in the market” (Pillai 22). The evils of the dowry system forced the governmets to enact suitable legislations to prevent this evil practice. With migration to Gulf countries, especially since 1970s, people’s attitude to life had changed and the state had become a consumer state (Eapen and Kodoth 21). Globalisation and its evil effects like consumerism resulted in an increasing number of crimes against women who were being viewed as objects of pleasure.
Many women question evil practices like the dowry system, commodification of women, rape, gender stereotypes, inhuman caste practices, and the denial of higher education to women. They want to be heard and given a respectable position in the family and society and when that is denied they reject man-made institutions like marriage and family.

Modern developments ushered in wide-spread changes in the social and cultural spheres. Modern education and exposure to Western ideas of individualism inspired women to break gender stereotypes. The modern empowered women, though very few in number, take decisions of their own, thus re-defining the contours of man-woman relationship. These women are self-expressive and assertive and argue that relationship between the sexes should be based on democratic principles of equality, fraternity and mutual respect.

By nineties, a large number of independent women’s movements, like Anweshi by Ajitha, were formed and they took up issues related to women. The ideas of western feminists like Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, Betty Friedan, Shulamith Firestone, Sandra Gilbert and Susasan Gubar found greater acceptance among feminists and in academic circles. The feminist movement in the twenty-first century is characterized by a greater demand to exercise their power in deciding the course of their personal lives and their right to self-determination. They also question many restrictive practices, traditions and stereotypes of our society thus aiming at deconstructing traditional mindsets.

But in spite of constitutional and legal provisions aimed at facilitating their status as equals, many Indian women continue to suffer. According to Suma Chitnis, “The greatest obstacle to change in the directions of equality is the value system by
which women abide. Women are conditioned to revere the father and to serve the husband as a devotee serves God” (90).

Women develop negative self-concepts as many of the feminine traits are considered inferior or valued negatively. Their attempts to adopt desirable masculine traits take away from them the socially sanctioned ‘nice feminine women’. The result is that a woman is faced with contradictions and damages her self-image. According to Manisha Roy, “this concept of ‘femininity’ fosters ambivalence and an increasing polarization between the two concepts masculinity and femininity, yielding a hostile sex-struggle in personal as well as public spheres of male-female interaction” (142).

Feminists also began to question the two major institutions of male power: the family and the church which together succeeded in crushing the democratic aspirations of women. Feminists protest against the way such social institutions supported by cultural values and normative expectations oppressed women. They attack the brutal and unabashed misogyny and also the recurrent glorification of wifely and maternal roles. This misogynist culture denies education and jobs to girls because “a girl was a wasted investment because she would leave her parents after marriage and live at her in-laws’ house” (Bumiller 90).

A woman/mother is always known by her husband/son. Ashis Nandy writes, “For the Indian mother . . . on the other hand, the son is the major medium of self-expression. It is her motherhood that the traditional family values and respects; her wifehood and daughterhood are devalued and debased” (74).

Love, devotion and hardwork are foregrounded as necessary qualities for happy marriages and happy families. This is often seen by feminists as a ploy to disguise the economic and patriarchal bases of marriage and family. This family ideology thus
disguises the fundamental economic and inegalitarian aspect of this patriarchal institution.

The ideal of womanhood as embodied by Sita and Savitri teach that fidelity and exclusive devotion to one’s husband are the prerequisites for one’s role as wife and mother. According to Sudhir Kakar, “The formidable consensus on the ideal of womanhood which, in spite of many changes in individual circumstances in the course of modernization, urbanization and education, still governs the inner imagery of individual women as well as the social relations between them in both the traditional and modern sectors of the Indian community” (57). Regional myths like the myth of Kadalamma (Mother Sea) have been a part of the feminine consciousness of every Malayalee woman.

Feminist authors generally speak of law as an instrument of power wielded by men or the State. Many existing laws are biased against women and in favour of men. The insensitive and dysfunctional legal system, within a patriarchal culture, often fails to solve women’s problems including their culturally sanctioned disinheritance. According to Rehana Ghadially, “the major reason why development has brought little or no benefits for women is that the pattern of development has been superimposed on a pre-existing system with social structures severely in disfavor of women” (14).

The continued operation of different religious personal laws, in spite of the Constitution of India, has the effect that men and women belonging to Hindu, Muslim, or Christian communities have different rights with regard to the same issues, marriage, divorce and succession being amongst them. Furthermore, men and women of the same community also have different rights in many personal matters and women invariably have fewer rights. The modern inheritance laws have been codified to protect the interest of men, leading to the disinheritance of women.
The maternal neglect of the girl child, which Johan Galtung calls structural violence toward woman, creates woman’s hostility toward womanhood and also symbolically towards her own self. “This classic instance of the psychological defense of turning against self by identifying with the aggressive male draws attention to the way in which some social institutions have made woman herself a participant in her self repudiation and intra-aggression. The oppressive reality for woman . . . is now only partially outside her” (Nandy 71). Mothers often aid in girls internalizing a value system which can wreak havoc in their later life.

Menstruation and childbirth are considered strong sources of pollution among the Hindus. Thus there is, within a caste, a hierarchy based on gender. There is a pervasive notion that women never attain the level of purity of men of their own castes, essentially because of the self-pollution associated with the bodily processes. They are, therefore, regarded as unfit for many roles in the sphere of rituals and worship.

Wife beating has become a common practice to subjugate women under patriarchal arrangement. An economically dependent woman is more vulnerable because she cannot risk breaking the relationship. According to Flavia, “aggression and violence are considered to be positive male qualities . . . Women themselves accept the subordinate role within marriage unquestioningly” (155). She continues, “The most fundamental factor which leads to wife beating is connected with the sexist structure of the society as well as of the family. . . . as long as the idea of a man as the head of the family remains rooted in our culture and in the eyes of the law, wife beating will be perpetuated in society” (161).

Media, especially the visual media of the modern period, often takes an anti-woman attitude. According to feminists, women’s real concerns are not taken up by the media. Instead, it presents a perverted picture of women. Some have felt that “viewing
cinema with feminist spectacles has only confirmed the ‘absence’ of women both on screen and as audience” (Lakshmi 224), proving the loss of identity and individuality of women.

Jyoti Punwani in her article “Portrayal of Women on Television” makes certain generalisations about the women portrayed on television. According to her, the majority of the characters are home-based, whether married or unmarried. Working women are always shown to be unhappy in their jobs. Marriage is seen as a natural state for a woman. If she is unmarried, widowed or divorced, she is unhappy in her single and lonely state. An ideal woman is presented as supportive and dependent. A domineering and independent woman is not a desirable role model. Women who try to break out of their traditional roles in society and family meet with failure and humiliation (226).

The objectives of women empowerment include the removal of women’s invisibility and the redressel of inequality including injustice and oppression. It also seeks to build a positive self-image and self-confidence which would help them to make healthy changes in the society. It encourages them to fight against gender discrimination, gender inequality, gender injustice and their invisibility in all areas of knowledge.

Indian women, especially Malayalee urban middle class women, are questioning their traditional roles of dependence on men and unsatisfactory social and cultural ideals. Talking about the dependence syndrome Chaman Nahal in “Feminism in Indian English Fiction” defines feminism as “as a mode of existence in which the women are free of the dependence syndrome: whether it is the husband or the father or the community or whether it is a religious group, ethnic group. When women free
themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materializes” (30).

Despite Kerala’s high human development and gender development index, there is still an entrenched patriarchy and reduced space for women’s voices in public and private spaces. Even in the midst of economic progress, there is alienation, insecurity and increasing disintegration of community/family spaces. There are serious contradictions in Kerala between the perceived ‘empowerment’ of women as indicated by social and gender development indicators and the real disempowerment – particularly in the private spaces of family and intimate space of bedroom. Serious discussions are afoot in Kerala on issues related to women’s space and empowerment.

Family relationships have always been the cornerstone of women’s lives but also a locus of major inequalities between men and women. In the late 1960s and early1970s, Second Wave feminists identified the family as a key site of women’s oppression. The ‘normal’ family in mid-twentieth century centred on heterosexual relationship where the bread-inning husband and home-making wife with their dependent children fulfilled the social norms of the family.

The structural changes in Kerala society start from 1960. The following decades were marked by the decay of social and political establishments, migration to cities outside Kerala, growth of extremist ideologies, acquaintance with existentialism and other western philosophical concepts in literature, and the changes in human relations.

Feminist movement in Kerala began in the mid 1980s. It was the result of caste and class oppression women had to suffer in a male dominated society. The domination of men in politics and the feeling of rejection experienced by women who worked in political parties forced them to protest against this male dominated attitude. Women,
even in communist socialist parties, began to protest against this attitude in the 1970s. Even though Kerala boasts of an overall literacy rate of 90 per cent with 86 per cent female literacy and has a powerful matrilineal tradition, these educational and cultural advantages have not been translated into higher political participation.

The important feminist organizations in Kerala, especially in 1985, were *Bodhana* in Kozhikodu, *Manushi* in Pattampi, *Prachodhana* in Thiruvananthapuram, and *Prabudhadha* in Kanjanghad. The women participants in various voluntary organizations which were active during this period began to question male superiority and began to organize women in order to protest against male chauvinistic attitudes and the anti-women policies of the government.

The atrocities committed by police including sexual assault against women in Thankamani in Idukki district in 1987 forced many feminists to vehemently protest against the attitude of the government as well as the major political parties on women’s issues. Issues faced by women like rape and dowry related deaths which were not taken up by the major political parties were taken up by feminists in the mid-1980s.

The feminist movements in 1990s differed sharply from those of 1980s in terms of their structure and activities. The idea of *A Platform for Action* which was suggested in Beijing convention in 1995 inspired feminists to start a network of women’s organizations like *Kerala Stree Vedhi*. It was actively involved in issues of women in the public sphere.

Elaine Showalter’s attempt to trace “the female literary tradition” in English fiction from about the 1840s to the present day is useful in bringing out the condition of women in modern society. Shawalter posited three major phases that she claimed were common to all literary subcultures. First, a phase of imitation; second, one of protest; and third, “a phase of self-discovery, a turning inward, freed from some of the
dependency of opposition, a search for identity” (Showalter 13). If self-discovery and individual fulfilment are the motives behind any literary creation, modern Malayalee women are in search of finding their identity and fulfilment in their family and society.

The expression of women’s experience through writing is one of the modes of resistance used by feminist writers to question and redefine patriarchy. Women resisting patriarchal notions establish the fact that there are power relations within the society that have to be challenged and demolished. Women write about their problems, the pain of their marginalization and their cultural ‘othering’ in the society.

These women writers re-define the husband-wife relationship in their novels. They are also critical of the family value system in which a son is considered the rightful heir and held in high esteem whereas a daughter is not allowed to develop her potentials. The various hierarchical systems that exist within families and communities associated with caste, sex, wealth, occupation and relationship are critiqued by them.

The women characters portrayed in these seven novels are torn between their individual desires and societal expectations. Some of these characters accept complete submission to patriarchal values, thus getting reconciled to their position whereas others question their lot. There are also characters who rebel in spite of their powerlessness. They try to assert their rights and individuality in marriage often leading to tensions in their relationship. Their suffering forces them and often gives them the strength to fight against their predicament.

This study deals with the status and role of women in families in Kerala from the early twentieth century to the present. It presents some key issues and themes related to women and the reasons for their subjugation. It also aims at identifying the religious and cultural sanctions which bind women to their enslavement and the efforts made by them to come out of their circumscribed position. The study also focuses on
identifying the problems and prospects of women in the modern world as well as the various strategies and techniques adopted by them to empower themselves.

The researcher also tries to deconstruct the prevalent belief that the women of Kerala are in a better position both economically and socially than their counterparts in the other states of India. This is only partially true. It is true that the state has attained remarkable developments especially in terms of the standard indicators of gender development. But modern family and other patriarchal institutions use subtle and diverse ways to control women in all spheres. Women of today feel crushed in a strictly patriarchal family set up. Domestic space, for many of them, is a cage and they fight to come out of their restrictive places to spaces of their own. Marriage is no longer institutionalised and they even enter into relationships with men of other communities, religion and race in search of healthy and meaningful relationships.

According to the recent estimate of the National Crime Records Bureau, Kerala ranks first among the States in overall crimes against women, particularly rape and domestic violence. This indicates that all is not well with the people of God’s own country who boast of the high status of women in the society. The fact that Kerala has one of the highest rates of recorded crimes against women and the highest incidence of domestic violence gives its people no chance to celebrate its victories. According to Swapna Mukhopadhyaya, a fear-psychosis is created among women which “acts as a powerful deterrent dissuading women from crossing the socially ordained boundaries of ‘good womanhood’; it is evidence that should tell us that something is not quite right with women’s status” (9).

Female literacy in Kerala was viewed as an instrument to be used for the benefit of the family and society, not for the benefit of the woman as an individual in her own right. Mukhopadhyaya continues, “Literacy may even have been an
instrument facilitating the process of internalization of that message . . . So here is a situation where high female literacy goes hand in hand with passive submission to male domination” (15).

Though some critics argue that women’s conditions have improved with the shift from marumakkathayam to makkathayam, others disagree with this observation. According Shanti Menon, “In many significant ways, patrilineality and matrilineality, at least as practised among the Nayars, are two sides of the same coin, particularly with regard to the power relationships within which women are located” (145). She continues:

The shift from matrilineality to patrilineality and monogamous marriage has meant that the ‘ownership’ of a woman has passed from her tharavad to her husband. It has also brought with it social and cultural pressures on women to adopt and conform to the patrilineal and patriarchal image of the ‘ideal’ Indian woman, one who is loyal and submissive to her husband. It is no longer considered ‘respectable’ for a woman to divorce her husband, and it is difficult for a woman to remarry, whether she is divorced or widowed. (141)

This project undertakes a study of the position of women in Kerala families as presented in these seven novels in the context of the issues discussed above. The influence of various social movements on Kerala family, especially the role of women in family and society and their present predicament, are potential areas of study both from social and literary perspectives. The writers chosen have given a truthful portrayal of women’s lives over the last few decades and have contributed significantly towards discussion of Kerala family and society from a feminist perspective.
The thesis comprises four chapters besides the introduction and the summing up. In the introductory chapter, the thesis statement and a note on the works written by these five authors have been presented. This chapter talks about the victimisation of women both in the family and society. The status of women in the early twentieth century and the changes that have taken place in the lives of women in family and society over the decades have been traced to establish the contemporaneity, relevance, and scope of the study.

Chapter two titled “Patriarchy, Gender and Feminism: A Study of the Changing Kerala Culture” serves as a theoretical framework for the study. It concentrates on the various ideological constructs of the patriarchal society in order to confine women to the family, restricting their individuality and identity. The feminist viewpoints regarding gender, masculinity and femininity are presented. The difference between Western and Indian feminism and the emergence of feminist movements in Kerala are discussed. A study of the works by women writes in Malayalam which deal with the subjugation of women by patriarchal institutions is also presented to substantiate the argument of the researcher that all is not well with the women in God’s own country.

Chapter three titled “A Name without a Face” presents the condition of women in the early twentieth century in the family and society as portrayed by Geeta Abraham Jose and Anita Nair through their novels By The River Pampa I Stood and The Better Man respectively. Jose is primarily concerned with the conditions of women in a caste-ridden society. She also presents women of these times who have happily accepted their traditional roles as wives and mothers. The chapter also deals with the empowered women of the later times who courageously fight against patriarchal oppressions in order to assert their identities. Nair too is concerned with the painful predicament of women in the early part of the twentieth century. Her concerns centre
around on women of this period who had no option but to submit themselves to male subjugation. She also brings out the gradual changes that occurred in the lives of women through education and employment, and their attempts to assert themselves even in a hostile environment. The enslaved as well as the empowered women of these times are presented.

Chapter four titled “The Domestic Mystique” deals with the women characters in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* and Nirmala Aravind’s *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride*. This chapter concentrates on the women of the second phase who had to rigorously adhere to patriarchal and familial values of the period. The nuclear family instead of liberating women from the chores of joint family makes the conditions of the women worse. The chapter also deals with the struggles of women to extricate themselves from the feminine and domestic mystique. It also deals with the slow changes that took place in the family as well as in the lives of women during the second phase and presents the enslaved and empowered women of the period.

Chapter five titled “The Changing Contours” focuses on the novels by Jaishree Misra and Anita Nair. Misra’s *Ancient Promises* and *Afterwards* and Anita Nair’s *Mistress* are analysed to bring out the physical and inner struggles of the women of the third phase. It concentrates on struggles by women of the third phase to empower themselves. It also deals with the protest of those suffering women who dare to throw away the marital bond in order to enjoy the freedom and happiness offered by the modern world. The concluding chapter summarizes the major arguments presented in various chapters.