Chapter II

Patriarchy, Gender and Feminism:

A Study of the Changing Kerala Culture

This chapter serves as a theoretical framework for the thesis, with the focus on patriarchal constructs like masculinity and femininity. It also deals with the major ideas of feminist thinkers regarding women’s subordination and enslavement especially in their families. The patriarchal ideology that the private space of the family is the domain of women is questioned by them. The salient features of Western feminism and their influence on Malayalee women writers and activists are also dealt with in this chapter.

The role and status of women in Kerala from the early twentieth century to the present is traced in order to identify the various factors which restricted and still restrict women from becoming empowered. The change from the joint family to the nuclear family and the greater subordination of women in the new arrangement are also discussed. Modern Malayalee women’s attempts to challenge and subvert patriarchal power structures and systems of oppression are discussed. The various changes that took place in the cultural domain of Kerala are also analysed in this chapter.

Feminism as a philosophical, political, social, cultural and literary movement challenges the patriarchal power structures which subordinate and oppress women in family as well as in society. Simone de Beauvoir said, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman . . . it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine” (The Second Sex 295). The social and cultural constructions of gender endow a superior status to men and women are defined by male-created cultural norms.
Gender is a key organizing concept of institutions and practices in culture and society. It refers to personality traits and behaviour patterns that are specifically associated with either men or women. Qualities such as love, caring and sympathy are associated with women and those associated with men are aggressiveness, virility, quick action and power. Writers in this field generally agree that masculinity, like femininity, is socially and culturally produced rather than a product of biology. Thus men and women are expected to fulfil a set of social expectations that define the types of behaviour that are ‘appropriate’ for each gender. These expectations and differences favour men, creating an imbalance in power and gender inequalities in all societies.

“They also help to associate maleness with a greater set of entitlements and privileges” (Geetha 71).

Gender is an important area of study in many disciplines such as literary theory, women’s studies, film theory, performance theory, contemporary art history, anthropology, sociology, psychology and psychoanalysis. In anthropology, sociology and psychology gender is often studied as a practice, whereas in cultural studies representations of gender are examined. Gender studies also examines the role that the biological states of being male or female have on social constructs of gender, and how gender roles are defined by biology and cultural trends.

The religions of the world have given sanction to male authority over women and female subjugation. The Bible exhorts women, “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For a husband has authority over his wife just as Christ has authority over the church . . . And so wives must submit completely to their husbands just as the church submits itself to Christ” (Eph 5: 22-23). St. Paul’s letter to Timothy also contains the same idea. He writes, “Women should learn in silence and all humility. I
do not allow them to teach or to have authority over men; they must keep quiet” (I Tim 2: 9–10).

There are many religious and cultural myths presenting women as the embodiment of nature and of eternal values. The aims of such myths, according to feminists, are to control and subjugate women and confine them to their private sphere. The tradition of Mother Goddess worship and the celebration of the virginal woman are found in most of the world religions. Amongst Hindus, the mother is a model woman, self-sacrificing, heroic and essentially noble. Christianity has a long tradition of worshipping Holy Mary, a symbol of virginity.

The views of various philosophers and theologians are not very different. Aristotle wrote, “The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities. We should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness” (qtd. in. The Second Sex 15-16). Roman law curtailed the rights of woman citing “the imbecility and instability of the sex” as the reason. Pythagoras said, “There is good principle which has created order, light and man; and a bad principle which has created chaos, darkness and woman”. Islam also believes that man is superior to woman because of his God given qualities and has the right to rule over and manage the lives and affairs of women.

In Hinduism, Manu constantly stresses the inferiority of woman to man. A woman is enjoined to be submissive and dependent on man. According to Manusmriti, “In childhood a female should be dependent on her father and in youth on her husband and after the death of her husband on her children” (IX: 14-15). Manu divided the Hindu society into four Varnas: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras, and the position of women was the same as that of Shudras. Most customs practised by the Hindu society privilege men. According to Kulkurni, in a patrilineal
Hindu society, “a male can offer water to the spirits of the deceased ancestors; a son alone can perform the essential rites ensuring passage to heaven or attainment of salvation. This makes a male offspring very desirable. . . Parents can depend upon them for support in old age . . . and sons are looked upon as potential builders of family prestige and prosperity” (*Women in Hindu Society* 5-6).

Manu and others considered women unfit to read *Shastras*. Their role was confined to the house: “A girl, a young woman, or even an old woman should not do anything independently, even in (her own) house. In childhood a woman should be under her father’s control, in youth under her husband’s and when her husband is dead, under her sons. She should not have independence” (*The Laws of Manu* 159). V. Geetha writes:

> Almost all such observations declare women’s bodies to be inherently inferior and sinful and fit to be controlled by men. Or alternatively they claim men’s bodies and souls to be measure of humanity. That is, man is the norm, the rule. Woman is a derivation, and as such is included in man. Men are granted the power to define, interpret, judge and represent the world on their own terms, while women are to be defined, interpreted, judged and represented by men. (12)

‘Sex’ marks the biological categories that are presumed natural, given or obvious. ‘Gender’ on the other hand indicates social categories. The sex/gender distinction includes a number of implications for understanding the oppression of women. When gender is understood as a social construct, it helps us in understanding the fact that women’s oppression is a product of society. According to Bryson, “If feminists are to fully understand and overcome practical inequalities and oppression, they must therefore also both challenge the ‘normality’ of man-made standards and
address the ways in which gender is constructed” (244). According to Richardson and Robinson, “gender is connected to social, economic and cultural status and power in society” (9). Robert J. Stoller also expresses a similar view that sex is biological, gender psychological and therefore cultural (48).

Radical feminists focus on biological factors as the root of oppression while cultural feminists focus on gender. Cultural feminists believe that women’s oppression within any society is mainly due to the devaluation of specifically feminine attributes. Cultural feminists champion the cause of women and demand that men value the work that women do in the family. Woolstonecraft and Woolf found that women are bound by social expectations, laws and economic structures. Men always wanted to affirm “the mental, moral and physical inferiority of women” (*A Room of One’s Own* 40). These attitudes and practices prevent women from exercising their liberty and autonomy.

Postmodern feminists emphasize diversity and difference. They see otherness, or alterity, not as a detriment but as something to be celebrated. They hold the view that sexual differences are socially constructed and not biologically based. They also hold the view that sex is socially and also linguistically determined. To them, ‘woman’ itself is a fiction contrived by an oppressive linguistic structure since the term ‘woman’ does not refer to any essentially defined group.

The First Wave Feminism spans the seventeenth through the early part of the twentieth century. The feminists of the First Wave were concerned about social, legal, political, social, economic, and intellectual/educational inequalities of women and the inhuman attitude of men in considering women to be less than human or rational. They fought for their right to vote, to hold public office, to speak in public, to make a contract, to own property, and to protection of persons. They wanted legal reforms to
alter society’s expectations of a woman as wife and mother. A change in the divorce law was imperative for women to demand equal recognition in marital relations. But almost all these demands were not accepted and were met with a lot of opposition.

Women in the United States could obtain the right to vote only in 1920 and women in Britain enjoyed this privilege only in 1928. Most of the early leaders of the feminist movement in America were anti-slavery activists. The two movements were closely linked for nearly half a century. The abolitionist movement in the early to mid-1800s in the United States helped the feminists to undertake the issues of women and their role in the society. Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf belong to the First Wave.

Women were also critical about the denial of citizenship to them which had been the exclusive privilege of men. John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) argued that women’s low achievement is not due to their inferior intelligence but because they have had fewer opportunities and an inferior education. He advocated equal opportunity for women in the public sphere. Thus equality in social life would help in maintaining a good relation between men and women. Harriet Taylor (1807-1858) argued that women should have a greater role in contributing to the family’s income and should have an equal share in family decisions.

The Second Wave begins somewhere between 1948 and 1960 and reaches its pinnacle from 1960 until the early 1990s. The Second Wave tried to address all those aspects of women’s oppression that could not be addressed solely through the achievement of economic and intellectual equality. Women’s bodily experience in culture and society including sexist oppressions are not resolved through the acquisition of rights alone. Women’s bodies are sites of domination, violence, and oppression. The treatment meted out to women did not change much even though they were included in the workforce.
The representative feminist of the Second Wave is Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986). Beauvoir exposed the social practices which infringe upon women’s freedom to act freely. A woman’s role as a housewife restricts her choices to act like a free being. Beauvoir’s sex/gender distinction was highly helpful in understanding the oppression of women. Her demand for breaking the roles and identities imposed on women by patriarchy greatly energized Second Wave feminists and became a part of the feminist theory from the 1960s to the late 1990s and is still relevant.

Betty Friedan’s (1921-2006) highly influential book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) influenced the feminist movement in the United States. She argued that the stifling life of a housewife was the root of their depression and called for a different approach to view the family and a different social existence for women. The publication of Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1969), Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970) and Eva Figes’s *Patriarchal Attitudes: Women in Society* (1987) revolutionized the concept of feminism and feminist criticism.

This period also witnessed the emergence of consciousness-raising groups exhorting women to unite for political action. The collective feminist action through women’s solidarity or sisterhood can fight against their subordination and oppression. But some feminists argued that all women do not have the same experience and women from different social, cultural and racial backgrounds experience different forms of oppression and thus would develop different identities. Thus identity politics is closely related to race and class. Second Wave feminism popularized the expression, “the personal is political”. Menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, housework, rape, domestic abuse, sexual harassment and countless other topics were brought out of the private realm into public discussion. Adrienne Rich questioned oppressive power structures including marriage.
The Third Wave feminists (the term Third Wave feminism was coined by Rebecca Walker in 1992) attacked the attitude of the Second Wave feminists which took into consideration the issues of white, middle class, heterosexual women but ignored women of other classes and races. The Third Wavers stood up for the issues of such women as their problems were unique and rejected the essentialism of the Second Wavers. The result was a post-structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality, problematizing the patriarchal inventions of binaries such as male/female and culture/nature. Till now the voice heard was of a privileged class of women and the 1980s and 90s witnessed an increased importance given to the problems of those who did not belong to the white, heterosexual middle class. The new concern was with ways of representing the experiences of the minorities which had been ignored. Women began to flout norms and conventions not only in sexuality, politics and ethics but also in language and writing. Feminist epistemology and philosophy of science questioned the notion of objectivity accepted by the scientific community.

Postmodern feminists argue that language as a symbolic system is hegemonic, dominant and phallocentric, and call for a liberation from this phallocentrism. Luce Irigary advocates the creation of a female language. Helene Cixous offered a notion of feminine writing that is linked to women’s embodiment and sexuality. This phase also marked the growth of queer theory and the ideas associated with Judith Butler. Sexuality is another issue of dominant concern for contemporary feminists and women opt for unconventional and radical forms of sexuality and non-heterosexual practices.

Another aspect of Third Wave feminism is the concept of gender as performance. Butler argues in *Gender Trouble* (1990) that gender performativity, acting out gender in a continual sort of process, actually creates the illusion of stable gender identities. Gender works in a continuum and gender identity is not something
fixed. Gender as performance means that all gender is created artificially through social practices that define gender. Thus cultural and sexual identity, according to her, is something that we perform: there is no essential self, no ‘real one’. Identity is constituted within the prevalent cultural codes, regulations and discourses. Butler’s aim is to destabilise any naturalisation of sexual identities. Thus, for Butler, gender becomes a cultural performance. It is a “stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body, and hence must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler 140-41).

To Derrida, post-structuralism exposes all dichotomies as constructed and relational, rather than eternally given. According to him, although objects and individuals may have a material existence, ‘reality’ does not have an inherent meaning but is mediated by experience and language. Words themselves have meaning only in relation to other words; they are also hierarchically ordered. For example ‘man’ is usually the standard in relation to which ‘woman’ gains meaning, rather than vice versa. If so, this can mean that masculinity and femininity contain meaning only in relation to each other and not because of their basis in sexed bodies so that “the question of gender then becomes primarily linguistic or discursive rather than material or social and its meaning is generated within linguistic structures” (Squires 60).

The social meaning of gender can be understood only through an analysis of language and discourse. Radical feminists have set out to challenge patriarchal control over meaning. Within Lacanian theory, the acquisition of gender identity corresponds with and is inseparable from the acquisition of language. Entry into the ‘symbolic order’ of language and culture is an essential pre-condition of becoming ‘human’, able to communicate with other humans. But the symbolic order is a gendered order which
inscribes and confirms male dominance. Women remain marginal within culture. They find themselves “in a special relation to language which becomes theirs as a consequence of becoming human, at the same time not theirs as a consequence of becoming female” (Cora Kaplan 82).

The Semiotic, which is closely connected with the Symbolic, stems from the pre-Oedipal phase and the child’s contact with its mother’s body. The Symbolic is associated with the Law of the father. The semiotic is thus closely connected with femininity.

Gender and hierarchy are closely linked. According to Brian Longurst “in societies where culture is seen as preferable and superior to nature and where the public always encompasses the private, then it is inevitable that gender relations will be apprehended in hierarchical terms” (Introducing Cultural Studies 83). Carol Pateman argues that “the patriarchal division between public and private is also a sexual division” (183). Women’s feelings of alienation, subjection and suffering being political issues ought not to be brushed away as belonging to the realm of ‘personal’.

Feminists who were concerned about how patriarchy limited and ultimately denied the individual her rightful due were inspired by the writings of the Frankfurt school, especially the work of Herbert Marcuse. His brilliant analysis on the relationship between psychological and political realities helped women to understand how the inner worlds of consciousness and the mind were shaped by political circumstances and structures.

The claim that ‘the personal is political’ is central to the concept of patriarchy. Private life was seen as an area in which power is both exercised and can be challenged, and this meant that women’s freedom was to be won not simply by allowing them to enter into public life, but by transforming their situation at home.
Thus the very definition of privacy is gendered. In 1895, Mary Cady Stanton published, in collaboration with other women, *The Woman’s Bible*, a feminist critical commentary which flouted the belief that female subordination was divinely ordained and claimed that men had manipulated religion to legitimise their power.

Gender injustice, gender inequality and female deprivation practised in the family and society forced many feminists to think seriously about patriarchy. In the nineteenth century, Anglo-European anthropologists used the term patriarchy to refer to a social system where men ruled the family, men alone were priests, descent was through the father and all the laws and norms were formulated by male members.

Patriarchal family has been responsible for a great deal of gender discrimination. It is often characterized by the denial of adequate education to women. Women lose their rights to property and their relation to family and society is one of subordination and subjugation. They also do not often have the right to choose their marriage partners. Men appear to enjoy such rights and even laws and customs are flexible in their case. Geetha stresses this patriarchal prejudice. According to her, patriarchy celebrates “heterosexuality, female fertility and motherhood on the one hand and valorizes female subordination to masculine authority and virility on the other” (*Patriarchy* 8).

Radical feminists highlighted the nuclear family as a key site of women’s oppression. The denial of the ‘right to choose’ whether and when she should give birth to a child became a key feminist issue. They began to lead campaigns for reproductive rights as part of a collective struggle against man’s control over women’s bodies. Patriarchy, they argued, exercises its control over women’s bodies through reproduction.

She argued that every type of oppression (racial, class, age, etc.) is modelled on the oppression of women by men. She observed, “The heart of women’s oppression is her child bearing and child rearing role” (72). Rich in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1977) also argues that it is not the biological fact of giving birth that oppresses women, but the fact that they reproduce in a patriarchal society in which motherhood is controlled by men and is seldom freely chosen by women.

Reproduction was identified as central to these processes of inequality. Firestone, for example, argued that the abolition of family was intrinsic to women’s liberation. To her, if the root of women’s oppression lay in anatomy, then the solution must be found in technology. This calls for the increased use of contraception, including gestation outside the womb.

In a patriarchal system the institution of sexuality works according to the interests of men. Every society tries to suppress the sexuality or sexual urges of women. Men found that patriarchy as an institution will survive only if women’s sexuality is suppressed. Thus the rise of patriarchy led to the suppression of women’s sexuality. Men have not only conquered women’s sexuality but began to define it according to their agenda or interests. Women’s sexual organs and menstruation were presented as dangerous and unclean. Patriarchy could make women believe that sexual fulfilment of women lay in procreation and the sexual satisfaction of their husbands. Sexuality as a patriarchal institution thus robbed a woman of her rights over her body and as a result she became alienated.

Cixous points out the necessity of writing about one’s own body. Women who have been taught by the patriarchal society to reject their bodies and be blind to its demands tried to torture the body by subscribing to sexual purity – a meaningless
construct of the patriarchal society. Cixous argues that women should write with their bodies.

Radical feminists highlighted sexual violence—rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment and pornography—as part of the patriarchal system of male oppression of women. They believed that the original shift to patriarchy from matriarchy was simply a consequence of men’s greater strength coming as it does from women’s weakness during pregnancy, child birth and lactation. For some, it was man’s ability to rape that led to his dominance and for others it was the discovery of the male role in reproduction that was critical and first led men to control women. Thus Rich wrote in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, “A crucial moment in human consciousness arrives when man discovers that it is he himself not the moon, or the spring rains or the spirit of the dead, who impregnates the woman; and the child she carries and gives birth to is his child, who can make him immortal” (60). From a radical feminist perspective, women’s liberation is achievable only when patriarchy is overthrown.

For other radical feminists it was sexual rather than domestic exploitation within the family that was crucial. Patriarchy is based on male domination and control of women’s sexuality. Male power, in its crudest and most aggressive form, is perpetuated in family. Marriage perpetuates a form of subordination disguised by love. Firestone argued that “love, perhaps even more than child bearing is the pivot of women’s oppression today” (*The Dialectic of Sex* 121). Love in a patriarchal society cannot be based upon equality, for power and eroticism are inextricably entangled. The demand for sexual autonomy and fulfilment has, therefore, to be seen as part of the general political struggle against patriarchy.
Marxists feminists argued that class relations lay at the root of the subordination of women. The oppression of women is maintained through domestic labour and as a result of women’s unequal position in the labour market. Women’s work is often considered supplementary to the work done by men. Gender inequality is, therefore, a system of class inequality which is maintained to serve the interests of the ruling class. From a Marxist feminist perspective, women’s freedom from oppression is achievable only when capitalism is overthrown.

Liberal feminism tended to highlight issues such as cultural gender stereotyping and gender divisions at home and work spots. These aspects of gender inequality, liberal feminists argued, can be ended through equal opportunities legislation and other democratic measures. From this perspective, equality for women is achieved through a gradual process of social and legal reforms. Thus the home is often a site of production and the household, it is argued, is a crucial site for the transaction of patriarchal authority.

Lesbianism gave its practitioners a platform for sexual choice as well as a repudiation of patriarchy. It is a form of resistance to existing structures of social relations and a radical reorganization of the same. According to them, the relationship between men and women is essentially political which involves power and dominance. Geetha notes that “what we consider ‘normal’ men and women living in heterosexual intimacy, bound by ties of blood, marriage property and caste may at best be a hegemonic model which has survived by not allowing other social lives a legitimate existence” (Gender 198).

To Rich, patriarchal culture socializes women to be heterosexual. She calls it “compulsory heterosexuality”. Lesbians and transgenders attempt to re-make their bodies. Thus Lesbianism, as a political commitment, turns to other women for
emotional support. This patriarchal conditioning to accept heterosexuality as a norm keeps women from being free, according to lesbian ethics.

According to Mary Eagleton, “Lesbianism exists not as a ‘sexual preference’ or as an ‘alternative life style’ or as the choice of the minority group but as a fundamental critique of the dominant order and as an organizing principle for women” (3). Lesbianism also rejects essentialism. Heterosexuality is considered to be a political institution and their struggle to gain control over the body is a struggle for dignity, self-determination and identity.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1750-1797), an ardent spokesperson for social justice and human rights, stood for women’s civil and economic rights. She wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) to protest against the subjugation of women and its perpetuation in the society. According to her, knowledge is gained through experience. But if one’s experience is circumscribed by social customs, then one will be unable to perfect his/her nature. Wollstonecraft protested against the institutions that treated women as less than human by denying them any other identity except the one acquired through men. Her solution was to provide education to women so that they can fulfil their human potential and act autonomously.

John Stuart Mill wrote his *The Subjection of Women* in 1861. According to him, marriage makes a woman a servant and hence perpetuates “domestic slavery”. Mill argued strongly for changes in the legal status of women. He found that among the poor, women were subjected to indignities and cruelties and men proved their superiority by crude force. Male ascendency or superiority is the psychological foundation of all forms of oppression.

Friedrich Engels’ *The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) provided a comprehensive account of marriage and family organization. To him,
marriage and family are not immutable and hence subject to change because they are historical institutions and hence changeable like any other social phenomenon. In primitive societies, the relationship between the sexes was based on equality. But this egalitarian situation changed with the development of a new source of wealth which men began to acquire through the domestication of animals. This helped some men to consolidate their wealth and power. Naturally their position in the family was strengthened and they wanted to pass on their property to their children. They achieved this by overthrowing the traditional order of inheritance and ensured strict monogamy on the part of women, who became the possession of their husbands and the means of producing heirs. To Engels, marriage and family were built upon the ownership of women. According to him, “The overthrow of mother-right was the historical defeat of the female sex” (Origin 46).

_A Room of One’s Own_ (1929) by Woolf is a profound study of women’s writings and the problems they confront in a male-dominated tradition. Woolf asserts that patriarchal culture was responsible for the economic, intellectual and artistic impoverishment of women. She stresses the fact that women should have more space within the social structures to realize their creative potential. She contends that the limited achievements of women in the field of arts are due to lack of opportunities, money, education and privacy and also due to domestic servitude, demands of motherhood, male hostility and above all, the absence of any nurturing female tradition. She makes it clear that if women are to write they must enjoy that material independence which is one of the necessary conditions for their liberty.

Woolf is concerned about the “safety and security of one sex and the poverty and insecurity of the other” (29). She examines the economic inequality between the two sexes and finds that financial dependency curbs intellectual growth. According to
her, “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (13). The expression, ‘a room of one’s own’, becomes an extended metaphor and refers to the creation of space for oneself in different walks of life.

Simone de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* (1949) argues that throughout history women have been reduced to objects for men and constructed as man’s ‘Other’, denying the right to her own subjectivity. The patriarchal ideology presents woman as *immanence* and man as *transcendence*, thus denying her the chances to live authentically. Beauvoir shows how these fundamental assumptions dominate all aspects of social, political and cultural life and how women themselves internalize this stereotyping, thus forcing themselves to live in a constant state of ‘inauthenticity’. This stereotyping of women was used as an excuse to organize society into a patriarchal structure. According to her, “man represents both the positive and the neutral . . . whereas woman represents only the negative . . . A man is in the right in being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong . . . So there is an absolute human type, the masculine” (*The Second Sex* 15).

Beauvoir uses immanence to describe the domain assigned to women: a closed world where women remain passive and static. She confirms that “Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society” (445). The man is the economic head of the family and she is his slave or vassal. The wife “takes his name; she belongs to his religion, his class, his circle, she joins his family, she becomes his ‘half’” (449). She has to rupture with her past, leave her paternal home and offers him her person, virginity and fidelity.

Maternity is presented as respectable and fulfilling for a married woman because an unmarried mother is a burden to others. But in reality this institution is a means to fulfil man’s existence. Traditional marriage does not allow a woman to
transcend herself with him. “It has been said that marriage diminishes man, which is often true; but almost always annihilates woman . . . At twenty or thereabouts mistress of a home, bound permanently to a man, a child in her arms, she stands with her life virtually finished forever” (*The Second Sex* 496).

The period after World War II witnessed liberal protests in the United States against the failure of the society to deliver women the promises of independence. Friedan argued that in the United States after World War II, certain feminist dreams of education and independence had been replaced by an all pervasive ‘feminine mystique’ which persuaded women into the belief that their only fulfilment lay in domesticity but which proved paradoxically to be most oppressive. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a notable factor had been the recurrent glorification of the wifely and maternal role that Friedan named ‘the feminine mystique’, the belief that woman’s ‘nature’ required her to seek fulfilment in submissive domesticity. This anti-feminist stance was founded on the belief that when they denied freedom to a woman, it was done to safeguard her interests. Women who were frustrated and dissatisfied with this ideology were considered to be subversive and neurotic.

*The Feminine Mystique* (1963) examines the dehumanizing conditions of middle class American women who were excluded from social and political life to be anchored in their wifely and motherly roles. The book marks the Second Wave of American feminism. Friedan writes, “Their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers” (61). This meant that the whole of an American woman’s life was meant to attract and keep her husband and serve his and children’s needs. She deals with this painful ordeal of women and clearly brings out the ennui, unhappiness, and the lack of companionship experienced by women in their marriages.
The feminine mystique was so powerful that women failed to realize their true desires and actual capacities. According to Friedan, American women made a wrong choice by confining themselves to the security of the house and living “the pretty lie of the feminine mystique” (290). Feminists challenged this gentle image of a wife and mother and also the privileges enjoyed by men. For the women of 1960s domesticity denied them their chances to develop their potential to the fullest and reduced them to dependent and passive creatures. Freidan calls the family of 1950s a “comfortable concentration camp” (228).

Millet, the main theoretician of new feminism, presents the nature of power relationships between men and women. Sexual Politics (1969) is centred on the concept of patriarchy. Millet writes, “the principles of patriarchy appear to be twofold: male shall dominate female, elder male shall dominate younger” (Sexual Politics 25). According to her, if the term ‘politics’ is defined as power-structured relationships where one group is controlled by another, then the relationship between the two sexes should be viewed from a political perspective. So the relationship between the sexes is based on a relationship of dominance and subordinance. The sexual domination is so universal, so ubiquitous and so complete that it appears ‘natural’ and hence becomes invisible.

According to Millet, “Patriarchy’s chief institution is the family . . . a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole” (33). Family mediates between individual and social structures controlling people. Family serves as an agent of the larger society and a unit of the patriarchal state. The co-operation between the family and the larger society helps both from falling apart. Hence patriarchal institutions like family, society and the state are inter-related. The relationship between a father and his children is
similar to the relationship between a ruler and his subjects and this relationship points
to the feudal character of the patriarchal families even in modern democracies.

According to Millet, “Patriarchy has God on its side . . . when it wishes to exalt
sexuality it celebrates fertility through the phallus; when it wishes to denigrate
sexuality, it cites Pandora” (51). Patriarchy is more a habit of mind and a way of life
than a political system. It is so deeply embedded in our culture that a change in the
former is more difficult to attain than a change in the latter. According to her, a sexual
revolution would bring to an end the institution of patriarchy and the ideology of male
supremacy.

Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970) makes a vehement attack on the
stereotyping and fixed gender roles to which women are conditioned. According to
her, “the female is considered a sexual object for the use and appreciation of other
sexual beings, men. Her sexuality is both denied and misrepresented by being
identified as passivity . . . The characteristics that are praised and rewarded are those of
the castrate – timidity, plumpness, languor, delicacy and preciosity” (*The Female
Eunuch* 17).

The title ‘The Female Eunuch’ suggests denial of sexuality to women, thus a
non-entity. When this vital part of one’s life is removed or suppressed one becomes
like a eunuch. She argues, “If marriage and family depend upon the castration of
women let them change or disappear” (111).

To Greer, the failure of a woman to produce great works of art lies in her
conditioning. She can excel in her intellectual activity only when she escapes or rejects
her conditioning. But often she yields to her conditioning and her efficiency is
hampered by the inner conflict she suffers. This conditioning or stereotyping of the
‘Eternal Feminine’ makes her believe that she has nothing else but her home and
family. Any woman who wants to liberate herself from this role to enjoy life through the realization of her potential cannot accept such a role. To Greer, “mother is the dead heart of the family” (251). Distrust and egotism play havoc in the destruction of marital relationship and bring loneliness in the lives of many people.

Language is central to Lacanian psychoanalysis. The ‘unconscious’ in Lacan’s famous expression is ‘structured like a language’. Lacan builds upon Freud’s views of the early stages of psycho-sexual development and the formation of the Oedipus complex into a distinction between the pre-linguistic stage which he calls the “Imaginary” and the stage after the acquisition of language which he calls the “Symbolic”. In the Imaginary stage, there is no clear distinction between Self and Other or between the subject and an object, and there is a kind of idealized identification with the mother and the child perceives no separation between itself and the world. In the Imaginary there is no difference and no absence, only identity and presence.

The new order which the child now enters is, called by Lacan, the Symbolic. In the Symbolic stage, the child assimilates the inherited system of linguistic differences and thereby learns to accept its pre-determined “position” in such linguistic opposition as male/female, father/son, mother/daughter. This symbolic realm of language, in Lacan’s theory, is the realm of the law of the father, in which the “phallus” is “the privileged signifier” that serves to establish the mode for all other signifiers. This distinction between the Imaginary and the Symbolic has been used exclusively in literary studies by French feminist critics, especially by Cixous, Irigarary and Kristeva.

According to Lacan and his followers, sexual identity in particular is never secure, and the terms ‘woman’ and ‘man’ are not unified or stable categories, for these categories are linguistically constructed rather than biologically given. Nevertheless,
Lacan argues that in all cultures the acquisition of sexual identity is fundamentally different for boys and girls because this is acquired via a resolution of the Oedipal complex and entry into the ‘Symbolic Order’ of adult masculine language. The organizing principle of the ‘Symbolic Order’ is the ‘phallus’; this metaphor for paternal power is the condition of discourse, which is constituted in binary, either/or terms of presence or lack. Although the phallus cannot be reduced to the penis, its association with the presence or absence of this means that, according to Lacan, ‘woman’ is constituted in terms of a lack; the feminist is, therefore, outside of and permanently excluded from ‘phallic discourse’.

Kristeva’s thinking is influenced by Lacan. The symbolic order is in reality the patriarchal sexual and social order of modern class-society, structured around the ‘transcendental signifier’ of the phallus dominated by the Law which the father embodies. The oppressiveness of the actual social and sexual relations of such a system is precisely the target of feminist critique. According to Kristeva, in entering the symbolic order, the ‘semiotic’ (child’s unorganized language) is repressed. The semiotic is the ‘Other’ of language which is nonetheless entwined with it “because it stems from the pre-Oedipal phase, it is bound up with the child’s contact with the mother’s body, whereas the symbolic . . . is associated with the Law of the father. The semiotic is thus closely connected with femininity but in by no means a language exclusive to women, for it arises from pre-Oedipal period which recognizes no distinctions of gender” (qtd. in. Terry Eagleton 214).

Freud’s theory of sexuality has been challenged by a number of feminists in the 1960s and 1970s like Freidan (1963), Firestone (1971) and Millet (1977). Feminist re-readings of Freud’s theories have identified different patterns in the dynamics of parent-child conflict. Nancy Chodorow, for instance, argues that the pattern of the
Oedipal drama is the same whatever be the sex of the child. All children, she says, are in love with their primary care givers who are usually their mothers. Therefore, it is the relationship with the mother and the way in which separation from her is achieved, that is primarily responsible for whether a child grows up to be masculine or feminine.

According to Chodorow, traditional mothering creates in woman a feeling that she is destined to perform domestic chores and is forced to accept social positions which are inferior to that of men. This kind of mothering puts a severe strain on a boy to become masculine than for a girl to become feminine. She writes that the “core gender identity and masculinity are conflictual for men, and are bound up with the masculine sense of self in a way that core gender identity and femininity are not for women” (44-45).

Chodorow also highlights the fact that mothers are central to the perpetuation of male dominance because they foster masculinity in their sons and joins repressive patriarchal forces to suppress all initiatives of the next generation of women through promoting femininity in their daughters. Thus an important function of family is the psychological formation of individuals to suit the patriarchal system.

The tendency to see sexuality as constitutive and site of male power has its roots in radical feminism. Sexual relations both reflect and serve to maintain women’s subordination. Patriarchal constructions of sexuality constrain women in many aspects of their lives. Sexuality is shaped by the society and culture in which we live and also by religious teachings, laws, psychological theories, social policies and popular culture. To say that sexuality is socially constructed means that one’s sexual feelings and activities, the ways in which one thinks about sexuality and one’s sexual identities are the product of social and historical forces. So sexuality has social control of women.
The end of the 1970s saw a change of emphasis in feminist theory and practice regarding sexuality. Women began to assert their right to sexual freedom and pleasure and critiqued the idea that it was natural for men to sexually dominate women. Irigarary in her essay “The Bodily Encounter with the Mother” writes, “Perhaps we have reached a period in history when the question of domination by fathers can no longer be avoided . . . and women . . . are looking for their sexual identity and are beginning to emerge from silence and anonymity” (415).

Motherhood has two forms: one as a woman’s own experience and the other as patriarchy’s medium to torture woman. Motherhood as an institution refers to the second. Rich elaborately discusses this in her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. According to her, there are two meanings for motherhood. One is the intense relationship any woman has with regard to her procreative abilities and to her children. The second is the patriarchal institution which keeps under its control such relationship and woman (13). Feminists criticise the institution of motherhood because it robs woman of her rights over her procreative abilities and children. It denies woman the right to take independent decisions and degrades woman’s desires, imagination and experiences.

In patrilineal societies, descent is reckoned through the father and property passes to the boys depriving girls of their rightful share. These property arrangements had and continue to have a lot of social and psychological repercussions. Girls grow up with the feeling that they ‘belong’ elsewhere, to the family into which they are married into. Such marginalization gives them the feeling that they are ‘property less’. They are themselves viewed as ‘gifts’ to be given away in marriage to worthy men.

The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 could not eradicate the practice of giving and receiving dowry and the social custom goes on unchecked. This custom has
proved dangerous or detrimental to the welfare of the society in general and women in particular. Dowry was not mandatory or a precondition for marriage in earlier times. It is only during the last sixty to seventy years that the evils of the dowry system have assumed dangerous proportions. Many acts of legislation have been enacted in our country to prevent the evils of the dowry system. The Act was amended in 1984 and 1986.

Parents often believe that their main obligation towards their daughter is to get her married as early as possible. Manu writes, “A father who does not give her away at the proper time should be blamed” (196). Divorce and remarriage were prohibited to women. Society held the view that even if the husband was immoral or ill treated his wife, the latter could not claim any right for divorce. “A virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a God, even if he behaves badly, freely indulges his lust, and is devoid of any good qualities” (Manu 115). This attitude resulted in the ill treatment of women in general and wives in particular. This grave situation forced many social reformers and women’s organizations to demand education and a respectable position for women in the family and in society.

Widows have been put to great humiliation and misery due to certain customs and practices. The Hindu customs and practices ordained that these women should spend their remaining lives in miserable conditions serving other members in the family even if they were insulted, humiliated or sexually abused. These unfortunate women have to either immolate themselves or spend the rest of their lives like ascetics, detached from worldly pleasures. Another option available to the widow was to cohabit with her brother-in-law till she had children. This custom of niyoga was regarded as a spiritual necessity. The woman was regarded as property, which was passed on to the husband’s family on her marriage.
Rape is the most heinous crime committed against a woman and often the victim suffers silently as she does not want to damage her self-respect and dignity further. “India’s society rails against rape, in the main, not out of concern for victims but because of the despicable notion that a woman’s body is the repository of family honour. It is this honor our society seeks to protect, not individual women” (“Time to be Ashamed”, Editorial, The Hindu, Wed. December 19, 2012.10).

Anup Surendranath in his article “Castration is not the right legal response” argues:

Violence, power, aggression and humiliation are central to understanding rape, and sex is only a mechanism used to achieve those aims . . . Any meaningful attempt to protect women against rape must engage with gendered notions of power entrenched in our families, our marriages, our work places, our educational institutions, our religions, our laws, our political parties and, perhaps, worst of all, in our minds. (The Hindu. Monday Dec. 24, 2012.10)

Domestic violence is deeply embedded in patriarchal norms. Family as a place of security and love is gradually giving way to a battlefield of endless arguments and cases. According to a report published by Malayala Manorama, as presented by the Home Minister of Kerala, Sri. Ramesh Chennithala in the State Legislative Assembly, 35,243 cases of physical and sexual harassment of women were reported from 2011 to 2014. During this period, 13,388 dowry related assaults and 2952 rape cases were registered. While 289 women were killed, 1375 girl children are found missing. 412 girl students committed suicide for various reasons (Malayala Manorama Jan. 31. Friday. 2014).
Marriage is a significant social institution. Marriages are performed in all cultures with certain religious ceremonies. The institution of marriage is undergoing rapid changes in the modern period. According to Amiteshwar Ratra, et.al, “In early history of marriage, we find dharma and progeny the primary aims and *rati* (sex or personal satisfaction) as the tertiary goal. However, in recent history, sex for personal satisfaction has grown large” (2).

In ancient India, it was believed that *Moksha* could be attained only with the complete fulfilment of the purpose of life of men and women through marriage which was considered a sacrament. The four ideals of human existence, according to Hinduism, are *Dharma, Artha, Kama* and *Moksha*. These four great ideals of life can be attained by a man and a woman through marriage. Social duty towards the family and the community marked traditional Hindu marriages where individual interests were relegated to the background.

The traditional concept of marriage was governed by selfless love between the husband and the wife. *Pati* is Parameshwar, husband is God and wife is given the status of *Ardhangini*, the other half or the better half of man. Both man and woman remain incomplete without the other. The economic dependence of wives on their husbands made it impossible for them to live separately and the attitude of the society towards divorce was highly negative. Marriage, considered a sacrament earlier, is being seen today as a contract.

For millions of women in India, an arranged marriage means changing their ownership from fathers to husbands. Marriage is thrust upon them by their parents taking into consideration the family status, educational, economic, religious and caste backgrounds. Often the bride’s parents have to pay a huge dowry to meet the demands
of the in-laws, the failure of which results in atrocities committed to women including bride-burning. Today inter-class and inter-caste marriages are on the rise.

People who have migrated to other states or other countries sometimes enter into relationships with men or women of those states or nations. The differences in their culture, religion, values and language put enormous burden on their relationships. This type of relationship is fast becoming a feature of Kerala society where many men and women are employed in other states and countries.

Today a lot of educated women pursue career with marriage. Although increased employment has brought women better social status and mobility, their burden has doubled as they are still considered house wives by their family members. A woman’s dual career roles give her a lot of physical and mental strain. Women who have to meet the demands of career and family duties find themselves in a suffocating situation and many live an insipid and unenthusiastic married life.

The increased participation of women in the workforce has brought in drastic changes in the man-woman relationship. Women seek more freedom and equality at home. But the patriarchal society is still not ready to part with men’s rights and privileges. This has resulted in adjustment problems between spouses.

In marriages, money and power are almost entirely controlled by men. Most marriages continue to be fairly inequitable when it comes to the sharing of power. An employed woman is more likely to challenge the supremacy of man especially if she has a high income job. Many husbands believe that if wives get a good salary they will not be dependent on them and this might lead to the weakening of their authority.

Some knowledge of Kerala culture, its institutions and practices and its marriage and family practices are essential for the study of the selected novels. Kerala, where Hindus, Christians and Muslims with their various sub-castes live together, is a
land of contrasts. Even though Western ways of life and behaviour patterns have been largely welcomed by people, people are highly traditional and conservative. A strong tendency to question the values and customs held sacred for centuries co-exist with a fervent desire to protect the social values and customs handed down from generation to generation.

An understanding of the caste system and its practices are essential to the study of family relationships and the status of women in Kerala. Rigid caste observances hindered the progress of society. Feudal institutions flourished with the support of the caste system. People were mainly divided into high class (melor) and low class (kizhor) people.

Land holding was by custom the prerogative of the upper castes. Janmam rights (rights by birth) were denied to low caste people. The Brahmans or high caste Nayars and aristocratic high caste families owned most of the land. The tenant (Kudiyan) was a dependent on the land owner (Janmi). The janmies were powerful and were addressed as yajamanans (masters). The tenant was considered the slave (adiyan) of his master. The tenant was keen on satisfying his landlord’s whims and fancies as he was at his mercy. Some janmies even coerced the tenants’ families to have sexual relationships or even arranged sambandham (alliance) with their women.

The disabilities of the untouchables were numerous. Rigid caste practices prevented individuals and families from having any healthy relationships with one another. In this system the conditions of women were the worst. A Nayar had to stand six feet away from a Nambuthiri, a Tiya twenty four feet away, a Kammalan thirty six feet away and a Nayadi seventy two feet away. The untouchables (tindal jati) formed more than half the Hindu population from Tiyas downwards whose touch polluted castes above them. Their women were forbidden to cover their breasts. They were
denied entry to temples and could not use public roads, public schools, public hospitals, public wells and other public amenities.

The movements against untouchability were undertaken in the beginning of the twentieth century. Sri Narayana Guru, the spiritual leader and reformer of the Ezhavas, stood for “One Caste, One Religion, One God”. Vaikom Satyagraha in 1924 demanded the opening of the roads around the temples to the untouchables. Sri Naryana Guru, Kumaran Asan, T.K. Madhavan and others exhorted the Ezhavas to fight for this just cause than live in such disgrace. Ezhava leaders like K. Aiyappan (called Sahodharan Aiyappan) and Nayar leaders like Mannathu Padmanabhan propagated the idea of a casteless society. Christians also joined this bandwagon by educating low caste pupils in their schools. The Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Sangham (SNDP) kept alive the demand for the reform of caste and the eradication of social ostracization.

The social movements as well as the spread of modern education gradually began to change the social structure of Kerala. If traditional education helped in preserving social conservatism, modern English education helped the dissemination of liberal ideas of equality, brotherhood, individualism, liberty, and dignity of the human person. The employment of the educated lower castes in schools and government services resulted in the breakdown of traditional values. Joint families got divided into smaller units due to the need for some members to move from village to city, or from one city to another in search of education and better job opportunities. People also believed that nuclear family ensured more satisfaction, security and privacy, greater economic growth and comfort. They were forced to take their wives and children with them as they were employed far away from home. Their earnings did not go to the common fund of the tharawads which educated them. Serious disagreements were frequent between the employed and earning members and those who stayed at home to
look after the *tharawad*. In addition to this, inter-caste marriages created further problems among members of the family. New habits and modes of life alien to the life in a *tharawad* were introduced by these educated and employed groups.

The family system as practised by the Nayars is quite different from those practised by other communities in Kerala. The matrilineal Nayars of Kerala are different from other castes because of their peculiar marriage customs, polyandrous unions and the freedom of women for conjugal relations. *Sambandham* (alliance) is the socially recognized marital alliance among matrilineals. It was not a sacrament like the other Hindu marriages. *Sambandham* is dissoluble at will and if a husband or wife deserted the spouse, a new *sambandham* could be contracted with another person. The instability of marriage leading to divorce was due to the fact that *sambandham* guaranteed no legal obligation of maintenance to the divorced wife. The legal aspect of *sambandham* did not bother the earlier generations as the husband was only a ‘genitor’ of children and maintenance of its daughters and their children was the obligation of the *tharawad*. Even though there was not any state law regarding the legal status of *sambandham*, the state always took it for granted because the community always considered *sambandham* a valid marriage. The first legislation to declare *sambandham* valid was enacted in Travancore in 1912 (The Travancore Nair Regulation of 1912), in Cochin in 1920 and lastly in British Malabar in 1933 by the Madras Marmakkathayam Act of 1933.

The absence of state laws legalizing *sambandham* prevented the state from recognizing the husband/father as the guardian of his wife and children. In the absence of any such regulation, the state could not insist on his duties of maintaining his wife and children nor could it grant the claim of the wife and children in his acquisitions. The right to maintenance and half of the self-acquired property of the husband/father
dying intestate was a great relief to the women and children. The Nair Regulation of 1925 (Travancore) amended the law of marriage, succession and family management including provision for partition in marumakkathayam tharawads. Marriages were always matrilocal and the husband and wife lived in their respective homes even after marriage. They are ‘duo-local’ (Kapadia 336). The wife and husband did not rely on each other for economic support. The husband-wife relationship was not supported by familial obligations either (Alexander 66).

The wife of a Nambutiri, called antharjanam, was not as free as her Nayar counterpart and strict obedience and respect to her husband were expected of her. Among the Nambutiris, only the eldest son could marry from his own caste, which alone was recognized as a genuine marriage contract and entitled the children born out of it to inherit the illam wealth. Thus the higher caste Hindus had two distinct forms of family, viz. the patrilineal and patrilocal joint family of the Nambutiris and the matrilineal and matrilocal joint family of the Nayars (Alexander 61). The visiting husband system gradually began to break down among the educated people who were employed in distant places. The Nayar Regulation of 1925 made polygamy illegal among Travancore Nayars.

The essence of matriliny is its system of descent. Under this system, descent was reckoned through the mother. Karanavan usually was the mother’s brother. Thus Karanavan is the senior male member and sometimes he would be superseded by his sister’s son senior in age. Karanavan has been described as the keystone of the marukakkathayam arch. He had enormous power and authority in the management of the tharavad and its property. In this system the father had no role even in the arrangement of the marriage of his daughter and the Karnavan played a dominant role. Gradually “Paternal affection often gained an upper hand over the artificial
relationships between the uncle and nephews” (Eapen 156). Earlier, husband’s interests lay with his sister’s children and his duty to his wife and children was nothing compared to this obligation. According to Puthenkalam, “The apathy of the fathers might have been due also to the psychological feeling arising from the tenuous tie that bound him to his wife, as well as from the possibility, where if it existed--that he was but one of the polyandrous husbands” (87). In this system the boy and girl had no choice in the selection of their spouse. The family arranged the match and it was thought to be best for them.

A Nayar woman was prohibited from marrying a Nayar of an inferior sub-caste and violation of such a rule would debar her from all social intercourse. Such a marriage is called pratiloma (hypogamy). Likewise, a Nayar woman who married a Nambutiri was not admitted into the kitchen of his illam or allowed to eat with the Nambutiri women. The position and status of Nayar woman during social functions bring out her precarious condition. Likewise a Nambutiri/Antarjanam, who married a Christian girl/boy would be prevented from having any contact with his family or social group. Such a practice was called padi adachu pindam vekkal.

One of the main objectives of the Nayar Regulation of 1925 was the partition in the marumakkathayam tharawads. An attempt to introduce makkathayam (patrilineal system of inheritance) was quite discernible. The maintenance and guardianship of the wife and children were vested with the husband or father. The Hindu Succession Act, 1956 favoured individual partition and many followed this regulation.

Though many critics believe that women in a Nair tharawad enjoyed a lot of freedom compared to the women of the present day, some hold an entirely divergent point of view. Even though the woman was the centre of the tharawad, it was controlled by the Karanavan. The husband-wife relationship was not a matter of great
concern, for the husband’s duty was to procreate children for the tharawad. In theory, women could exercise authority over their tharawad since property was under their control. But in practice women failed to protest against the autocratic attitude of the Karanavan. According to Robin Jeffrey, “Matriliny in Kerala was humane. Though the system was not matriarchal – women did not govern the household – it accorded them greater freedom, choice and respect than they would have found elsewhere in the world until the twentieth century” (35).

According to Renjini, “Even though the tarawad was de jure under the control of women but de facto it was ruled by the karanavan” (19). The Malabar tharawad had even been described as pennarasunad, meaning “the realm in which women ruled”. But one should be aware of the fact that “the system which existed was not matriarchal but matrilineal (Renjini 12). There is no clear historical evidence to prove that women exercised their rights over their property. Likewise the tali rite ceremony conducted for women at the age of eleven forced women to concentrate on domestic tasks, forcing them to give up their education. Thus matrilineal system was never favourable for female education as it confined women to the family. Matrilynly gave fame and recognition to the women of Kerala because it was thought that they wielded a lot of power. But in reality, they were devoid of freedom. Renjini concludes her study of matrilineal system by arguing that “it is a myth that women enjoyed high status in the matrilineal systems” (98).

The introduction of English education and Western ways of thought began to change the attitude and ways of life of the people. The impact of these forces in the cultural and social sphere led to the breaking up of old physical and mental barriers. According to K.N. Panikkar, “Familiarity with European history, institutions and languages and the concomitant influence of the European ideas of liberty, rationalism
and humanism acted as the ‘open sesame’ which made Indians critical of their own institutions and consequently led them to embark upon a career of reform” (3-4).

Today the notion of family is informed by the small family norm and patrifocal residence. Two reasons have been pointed out for this tilt towards the nuclear family. Firstly, the far-reaching political and socio-economic transformation in twentieth-century Malayalee society which initiated a range of progressive practices that liberated individuals from an entirely different social order. Secondly, the economic conditions under which the costs of bringing up children increased manifold (Devika S, Domesticating Malayalees 59). The small family is projected as the representative and desirable family system in progressive Kerala. The spread of the small family norm under the auspices of the Family Planning Programme speeded up the struggles to end the joint family system and paved the way for the modern family.

A sharp segregation between the sexes and different codes of conduct for the two sexes were maintained during this time. Purushadharmam (manly duty) differed greatly from streedharmam (womanly duty). Duties of women were mainly associated with the domestic domain. The new ideals of manhood and womanhood found in late nineteenth-century Malayalee society were still based on the earlier notions of sexual differences. According to Devika, “Women’s magazines defined for women a domain projected as directly in need of capacities that were specifically ‘womanly’–the domain of modern domesticity” (3).

The idea that the prosperity and well-being of a nation depended on the quality of its children reinforced the importance of the role of women in the bringing up of children. During 1920s and 1930s the proposal to reform the education of boys and girls, introducing two special subjects namely, Grihasthadharmam (householder’s duty) for boys and Grihnidharmam (housewife’s duty) for girls, gained currency.
Grihasthadharmam focused on the creation and utilization of wealth and man’s obligations towards his parents, spouse and children. Grihniidharmam consisted of taking care of the home, including cooking, home nursing and care during pregnancy. It also called for the practice of moral values in the family.

J. Devika, in her En-gendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming in Early Twentieth Century Keralam, vividly portrays the changes that have taken place in Kerala in the domestic and public sphere. She writes, “These decades also saw the spread of modern domesticity and the conjugal family; earlier modes of domestic life and marriage came under increasing threat due to legislative interventions and economic change, and . . . new ideas regarding civilized and moral family life and personal freedom gained greater velocity of circulation” (5-6).

But these social changes did not bring about great changes in the lives of women. Anna Chandy, speaking on behalf of the ‘women of Keralam’ in 1929, found that the ideal of domestic womanhood does not in itself pave the way for self-transformation. She argues for the employment of women in public institutions. This period also saw the discussion regarding the relevance of English education for Malayalee women.

The Syrian Christian community of Kerala claims an ancestry that goes back to the arrival of St. Thomas, one of the disciples of Jesus Christ, who is supposed to have set foot on the Indian soil at Kodungalloor in A.D. 52. The Syrian Christians of Kerala hold the firm belief that they are the descendants of the Nambutiri--the term used for the Malayalee Brahmins who got converted to Christianity during that time. These converted Nambutiris observed rigid caste rules and believed in caste superiority. The Syrian Christians follow the attitude of their Nambutiri ancestors. Many common elements can be found between the Hindus and Syrian Christians of Kerala, especially
their attitude to marriage and caste practices. Many of the customs and traditions followed by the Hindus were accepted with due modifications in course of time.

The coming of the CMS missionaries, who were invited to Travancore by the British Resident in order to reform the ancient Syrian Church, brought about a sea change in the attitude of the Syrian Christians. The liberal education imparted by the CMS missionaries helped the Syrian Christians realize the need for reform in society. These missionaries spread the message that everybody is equal before God. Thus the untouchables were taken into the Anglican churches by the White missionaries who were least troubled by their caste status. This was, however, not the case with the Syrian Christians who showed their extreme displeasure in sharing the same church with those considered ritually impure and polluting. So they built separate churches for themselves. The outcasts who were called ‘new christians’ are now called ‘Dalit christians’. The Syrian Christians made it a point not to mingle with the untouchables and strict endogamy was observed. Thus they maintained their identity as a caste group by observing the rules of pollution with regard to food and the distance to be maintained from the outcasts.

Syrian Christians consider marriage a sacrament and a permanent bond. Marriages often take place among people of the same denomination. Inter-religious marriages and marriages between relatives up to seven generations are prohibited. In a Christian marriage the husband represents Christ and the wife represents the church. According to Susan Visvanathan this “dominantly male symbolism of Christianity” (106) is suggestive of the type of relationship between a husband and wife.

Since the Syrian Christian family is patrilineal in nature, the sympathies of the parents lay with their sons and women are often given a paltry amount as dowry. The saddest thing is that the bride has no control over the money that she brings.
The huge amount of money demanded by the bridegroom’s family and the obligation to provide the same for a daughter at marriage brings in lot of financial strain on her parents. Often the greedy husband pesters his wife to bring more from her natal family. Thus the word “prestation” (Visvanathan 111) has enormous significance in the Kerala context. The bride and her family are pressurised to meet the unjust demands of the husband. Stridhanam is often not a wilful gift or presentation provided by the father for her daughter, but it is something that he is forced or pressurized to provide as a gift for his daughter.

The Travancore Act of 1916 had fixed stridhanam 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. This amount was considered a legitimate amount, equal to the payment of stridhanam. Women who received stridhanam could not inherit paternal property. The Indian Succession Act of 1925 which establishes equality between the sexes in the division of property is applicable today if the father dies intestate. The problem of disinheritance arises most acutely for a woman when she is evicted from her tharawad with a payment of five thousand rupees as her share of the paternal property. Thus a woman could be ‘legally’ evicted by her family, especially by her brothers.

As dowry is a kind of ‘disinheritance’, a woman has nowhere to go if her marriage fails. This Syrian Christian rule of inheritance was challenged by Mary Roy, the mother of Arundhati Roy, and the Supreme Court judgement in 1986 on Christian inheritance allows the daughters to have an equal share in the paternal property where fathers have died intestate. This is a great relief to many women especially in the case of families where the brothers do not feel morally compelled to provide for their sisters.

The only situation where women have some control over their financial matters is when they are the sole inheritors. In such cases the husband stays with his wife’s
relatives. But in a strong patriarchal society living with affine rather than with agnates is not a very comfortable proposition for the man. He has to give up his house name and take on the house name of his wife. In order to avoid this social discomfiture, many such men live in separate households with their wives and return to live with their wives’ parents only when they become old or bed-ridden. The financial advantage involved in such an alliance is a major reason for its acceptability among some people.

The Syrian Christian family has undergone great changes today. Women of today get better chances for education and the great demand for women in the medical field has made many women seek this profession. As the number of people seeking employment outside the state increased, the old family structure began to break up. Those sons who were away from the ancestral house began to settle in new places with their own nuclear family and the unwillingness of their parents to join them has created a lot of social problems.

Women’s liberation movement in Kerala began in the second half of the nineteenth century. The activities of the Christian missionaries, the English education made popular by the British and the Renaissance ideals strongly influenced the prevalent ideological set up. The period also witnessed the arrival and acceptance of new ideas, beliefs and values which were unknown to Malayalees till then.

The latter half of the nineteenth century witnessed enormous changes in the economic structure of Kerala. Malabar and princely states like Travancore and Kochi witnessed industrialization. Kerala shifted to the capitalistic mode of production and relationship. If in feudalism agricultural land was the main medium of production, with industrialisation man’s dependence on land was considerably reduced. Several industrial units began to emerge. Noticeable developments were found in service sectors including administrative services. Due to these developments a lot of
employment opportunities were created and people, irrespective of their caste and education, were attracted to this new sector. As a result of such developments a new economic class which was unfamiliar to Kerala till then began to emerge. This class included the literate and the non-literate who worked to earn their living. A large number of Malayalees were forced to go to Madhirassi (modern Chennai), Ceylon, Penang and other countries in search of jobs. Naturally this led to structural changes in the family. A division between the household and the workplace began to emerge.

These social developments created a lot of problems for women. Men began to gain financial supremacy due to these changes, forcing women to depend completely on them. The financial supremacy, coupled with the fruits of western education, gave men a lot of power and privileges in social, cultural and financial matters.

The separation of work from family led to the precarious position of family in the society. Family life, sexuality and love were seen as separate from the economic system. Hence the public sphere, comprising economy, politics, culture and literature, began to be considered the realm of men and the private/domestic sphere consisting of housework and bringing up children began to be seen as the realm of women. The patriarchal as well as the economic system found it important to confine women to the family. As a result, we find in the latter half of the nineteenth century political, cultural and religious ideologies idealising family life. Such structural changes gave a large public space, characterized by freedom, to men, and women were confined to their private spaces. Women began to protest against this separation and suppression when democratic ideas gained significance and acceptance.

Literature mirrored the world-view of this period including its patriarchal ideology, and women’s suppression was registered by many women writers in Malayalam. The negative attitude towards women and their infamous presentation in
literature were criticised by many women writers in Malayalam including Lalithambika Antharjanam, Madhavikutty, Sarah Joseph and many others. Saraswathy Amma vehemently criticised the contemptuous presentation of women in Changampuzha’s “Remanan”. Malayalam literature and criticism are highly male-centred and male-centric and we do not find a single woman critic in the history of Malayalam literature from 1800 to 1960.

Many writers exposed the miserable lives of women who were confined to the four walls of the house and strongly criticised the patriarchal culture that denied women an identity of their own. K. Padmavati Amma criticised the institution of marriage which forced a woman to marry the man chosen for her by her parents. Sarojini’s “Streethwam” (“Womanhood” 1916) vehemently criticises the attitudes of men who expect highly virtuous acts from women which are humanly impossible to perform. B. Pachiyamma brought to public debate the oppressive nature of the private space of women which was limited to the kitchen. In her article “Streeyum Swathanriyavum” (“Women and Freedom”) she compares the situation of a woman to that of a cat which always moves in and around the kitchen. According to her, men are responsible for women’s timidity which is the result of locking them up in the kitchen. By confining women to the private space of the family and, thus, denying them access to public life, men have succeeded in making them into psychologically malformed individuals.

Antharajanam’s stories like “Pratidhwani” (“Echo”) and “Ithu Ashasyamano?” deal with the sufferings of women in their families. Even though the characters are Antharjanams, they cannot be seen as the stories or experiences of a minority group. They deal with the experiences of women belonging to all sections.

Antharjanam’s “Ezhamidam” brings to light a woman’s desire for a respectable status in the family. Family is an unseen presence in her “Yugasandhya”. Devaki
Amma teacher recollects her painful experiences in her family life. Life was not a pleasant experience for her even though she led a life of patience. Family, to her, was like a prison which shattered all her artistic talents. Many of Antharjanam’s stories deal with the tension between familial ties on the one side and artistic life on the other as experienced by many women writers.

Saraswathy Amma, through her stories like “Madhurapalaharam” and “Vaividhyam Vende?” critiques the ideology practised by men in the family. According to her, a man, like a magician, can control and make his wife do anything if he succeeds in keeping her in a dependent emotional state. A woman will never get out of this state as long as men do not give her a chance to exercise her wisdom and intelligence. “Penn Budhi” deals with the commodification of woman even in her own family.

Saraswathy Amma’s “Bahumanapetta Amma”, “Ratnam Vilayunna Bhoomi” and “Pakalum Raavum” deal with hapless women whose lives have been shattered by their families. “Vivaha Vidheshwi” not only deals with the theme of sanctity attached to married life but with the destruction of marital life itself. In her stories we find women who value self-respect and freedom and fight against the patriarchal domination of their husbands to assert their rights and independence.

Madhavikutty (1934-2009), known as Kamala Das to English readers, deals with intense conflicts in a woman’s life and her harassment in her family. In her novel, My Story, she explores and shares her experiences as a body which serves as the foundation of her sociological, psychological and even spiritual development. She realizes that she cannot live her life according to the cultural specificities laid down by the society. She revolts against the rigid gender divisions in a sexist culture perpetrated by a society ruled and governed by men which traps women in wifehood and
motherhood and does not allow them any freedom for self-actualization. Marriage as an institution nauseates Das because it legitimates violence on women and gives men a legal control over women’s bodies. Her stories like “Kurachummanu”, “Neipayasam”, “Koladu” and “Kuttikattile Nari” deal with women’s lives destroyed by their families.

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed women’s liberation movements in Kerala. New ideas about democracy, equality and freedom influenced the existing ideologies. The changes in social structure created a lot of contradictions and disparity between the rights and positions of men and women. Women, who were confined to the family, began to clamour for education and freedom. This gave a new dimension to the democratic process in Kerala. The act of writing itself by women is an act of liberation for them.

Women’s magazines discussed issues related to women and attempted consciousness-raising on issues related to the freedom and emancipation of women. They helped women to express themselves and fight for their rights. Magazines such as Saradha (1904), Lakshmibhai (1905), Mahilaratnam (1916), Sahodari (1925), Mahilamandiram (1927), Malayala Masika (1931), Stree (1933), Bhasha Sarada (1915), Sumangala (1916), Sangamitra (1921) Muslim Mahila (1926), Vanitha Ratnam (1927) and Vanitha Kusumam (1927) stood for women and their rights. Thus there exists a close relationship between women’s emancipation and Malayalam literature.

The novels of Sarah Joseph (1946- ), a prominent woman writer of the modern period, examine the conditions of subaltern women especially through her novel Aalahayude Penmakkal. All the important characters in this novel are women and are alienated by male-centred power structures and sidelined by husbands, capitalists and religious dignitaries. Joseph’s narration reveals the complexities of women’s identity.
Joseph writes about male domination and the oppression of women in all walks of life. *Aalahayude Penmakkal* (1999), *Maattathi* (2003), and *Othappu, The Scent of the Other Side* (2005) discuss women’s experiences in a male-dominated society. Margaleetha, in *Othappu*, defies all norms and codes prescribed by religion, family and society. Through the ‘Alaha’s Prayer’, which is handed down from generation to generation orally to women, Joseph brings forth a language and tradition that is strictly female.

Urbanization and modernization have ushered in materialism and individualism which have contributed to substantial changes in the marriage and family systems in the Kerala society in the twentieth and twenty first century. Introduction of democratic ideals, secular ideas, technological advancement and westernization have resulted in vast social and attitudinal changes among all sections of the society.

The shift from joint to nuclear family, abolition of matriliny, the advent of patrifocal residence, the consumerist attitude of people who look at women as commodities, the increasing control of religions even in the modern world, sexual division of labour, women’s exclusion from active politics, increasing violence and oppression, domestic abuse, sexual harassment, dowry system which, in fact, is a disinherittance of women and kinship structures have pushed women to endless misery. The following chapters analyze the novels chosen for this dissertation in order to bring out the patriarchal biases of the Malayalee community and the counter moves adopted by the ‘weaker sex’.