Chapter III

A Name without a Face

Geeta Abraham Jose’s *By The River Pampa I Stood*

(Time - Early part of the twentieth century)

Keralam (the State of Kerala was formed in September 1956) became the site of progressive ideals as early as the nineteenth century with the arrival of missionaries from England and other parts of Europe to Malabar, Kochi and Tiruvitamkoor. Missionaries criticized various practices like untouchability, unapproachability, sexual immorality, hierarchies based on caste, and the entrenched power structures of the society. Later, community movements like the Shree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam, the Nair Service Society and Yogakshema Sabha were formed to weed out the evil practices existing in their respective communities. But such movements could not help much in improving the status of women of the period as these movements concentrated on abolishing certain casteist practices of the period where the practice of pollution was widely observed and inter-dining and inter-marriages were looked at in horror.

The abolition of *sambandham* and the widespread acceptance of the Eurocentric model of family only led to a greater confinement of women within the private spaces of the family. The newly formed Malayalee women ‘consented’ to their subordination because motherhood was seen as a predominant image characteristic of the Indian women. The changes in the family and property rights in the early twentieth century strengthened the public-domestic divide and denied women direct access to material wealth and resources.

The Syrian Christian women during this period were confined to the four walls of the house. All decisions were taken by the father. The opinion of the mothers were
either ignored or suppressed. Women’s domain was the kitchen. Religion exerted a great influence on the life of a Christian woman. Since a woman’s primary role was that of a housewife, the community attached a lot of importance to womanly qualities like love and caring.

This chapter undertakes a discussion of the condition of women in the early twentieth century Keralam as presented in Geeta Abraham Jose’s *By The River Pampa I Stood* and Anita Nair’s *The Better Man*. Jose is concerned about the condition of women especially in a strictly patriarchal Christian family of the early twentieth century when women were enjoined to live according to the religious and caste norms of the society. Though women of yesteryears lived according to the strict parameters laid down for them, a few flouted age-old conventions to register their protests. But these protests were in no way revolutionary to bring about drastic changes in the lives of women or in the attitudes of men.

This section seeks to analyse how patriarchal values and stereotypical gender roles negatively affect women leading to their enslavement. The novel, *By The River Pampa I Stood*, published in 2007, deals with the life of the Syrian Christians of Kerala which was steeped in tradition dating back to the time of St. Thomas, the apostle of Jesus. The story spans over a century and gives an insight into the life of the Syrian Christians of Kerala – their customs and traditions, the feudal set up and the social discrimination which have always remained a part and parcel of the social fabric of the community. This community which boasts of its tradition and ancestry sticks to age-old conventions and ancient laws, abhorring changes. The caste feelings and feudal hierarchy prevalent in the first half of the twentieth century and to some extent to this day are presented in detail. As such, this novel has a lot of similarities with Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*. This novel features a typical Syrian Christian family’s
great history, its glory, tradition, joys and sorrows and its eventual degradation and
decay rewriting the contours of human relationships.

A patriarchal society, especially a Christian community, places enormous
importance on the courteous behaviour of women. A woman is expected to be quite
hospitable and look after the needs of all the relatives and in-laws who make occasional
visits to the ancestral house. A loving, caring and submissive wife is presented as the
source of a family’s strength and success. It is her duty to serve the members of the
family, take care of their needs with extreme courtesy, the violation of which is
unpardonable and unacceptable. According to Diana Gittins, “By insisting that happy
marriages and happy families are made by individuals through love, devotion and
hardwork, the reality of the economic and patriarchal bases of marriage and family are
disguised or ignored” (161).

Mathen Varghese Ponnumpurackal and Saramma were an ideal couple.
Saramma loved and took care of her mother-in-law, even when she was on her sick
bed, like a dutiful daughter. She thus proved that she was not only a perfect daughter
but also a perfect daughter-in-law. Mathen and Saramma were perfect hosts on
occasions when the relatives of the large family gathered at Ponnumpurackal for their
Kudumbayogam (BTRPIS125). Saramma took great pains to see that the guests were
well fed and were provided with comfortable beds. Onam, Christmas and birthday
celebrations were also occasions for the members of the Gold House to come together
to enjoy the fellowship and camaraderie of the family. Uncles, aunts, cousins, and
distant relatives thronged the Gold House to make such celebrations an unforgettable
experience.

The presence of the great aunt Annammachi was a great source of support and
her stories were a source of inspiration for the new generation. Her stories had the
obvious purpose of inculcating human values in young minds. Annammachi keeps reminding the girls in the family that they have to undergo training in order to behave like little ladies because society expects such behaviour from girls. Her advice to them is to become “a proper Syrian Christian lady” (BTRPIS 15). They also have a great role in preserving and transmitting the rich tradition to the future generations. Annamma thus fulfills the traditional role of a mother goading young women into certain ways of behaviour appropriate to their gender. Even in her eighties she moved around helping people, taking away their blues, and filling their lives with love and laughter. The narrator compares her to a burning candle giving light and warmth to people who flock around her. Kudumbayogam, the gathering of the large scattered family, also helped its members to renew their friendships and take pride in their ancestral heritage.

The presence of a loving, helping mother is the source of happiness in families. This is highlighted by women writers. Where a woman is unhappy or physically absent, the system fails to provide succour to its inmates. So the narrator remarks that with the death of Annammachi “the house plunged into darkness after the burning candle had been blown out” (BTRPIS 142). Likewise, a woman who is denied support by her own family members undergoes a frightening experience in her own family. This is clear from Annammachi’s experience that “the loneliness inside the house frightened her” (BTRPIS 91). The narrator who thinks that she is an ‘outcaste’ to her family members also feels the same: “It had been terribly lonely inside the gold house” (BTRPIS 64). Women, like Annammachi, often conceal their “anguish and torment behind a façade of blissful existence” (BTRPIS 16).

The novel deals with the life of Annammachi, the fourth child of Mathen Varghese and Saramma of the Ponnumpurackal family of Kuttanad which had been well known for generations among the Syrian Christians of Kerala. She was forced to
lead a life like that of a widow, without knowing that her son and the man whom she loved were alive in some far away place. Annamma broke the rules by going against the rich traditions of the orthodox society thus bringing disrepute to the Ponnumpurackal family.

‘Ponnumpurackal’ literally means ‘The Gold House’ because of two reasons. One theory was that the Ponnumpurackal house had a strong room packed with gold and the other theory was that the house got its name from the golden colour of its womenfolk. The women were admired for their inner purity and their faces shone like gold because of their virtues. Both versions suggest the richness, glamour and family purity associated with this prosperous family. The general belief that it is women’s good conduct that brings reputation to the family is clear from the myth associated with the Ponnumpurackal family.

Annamma, the protagonist of the novel, is a prototype of the modern woman whose freedom and rights could not be circumscribed by age-old conventions and traditions. “She was one who reversed the Dos and Don’ts that convention demanded of her. Dos that were not meant to become Don’ts. Don’ts that were never meant to become Dos. And that too in a society that was highly sensitive to the slightest infringement of its conventions” (BTRPIS 5-6). She believed that an individual’s destiny could be shaped by one’s own will power. This will power enabled her to remain single without sticking to the false morality of her father and the conventions of the society. Even though she crossed traditional boundaries and became a sinner in the eyes of the society, she registers her protest by remaining single the rest of her life.

Marriage is viewed by many men as a means to enrich their coffers. Mathen’s second son Unni’s marriage to Gracie, the daughter of a magistrate, brought considerable dowry to him. He also received a hundred acres of land in the high ranges
and a coveted job in Delhi. The Syrian Christians’ greed for money is evident from the statement that he wouldn’t have minded “even if it all had been given to him, minus the bride” (BTRPIS 61). He was quite practical and ‘tolerated’ his wife. Mathen was greatly pleased with this alliance for it brought reputation and money to the family. He always referred to Gracie as “Mol” meaning, ‘daughter’ (BTRPIS 59). A motor accident in Delhi kills Gracie and Unni on their first wedding Anniversary, bringing their uneventful marital life to an end.

Mathen sends all his sons to a reputed boarding school in Kottayam. But Anna was sent to the only primary school in the village. In a Syrian Christian family, a man’s wealth and position depended on the education and achievements of his sons rather than those of his daughters. Often mothers too accept this social reality. Mathen’s desire to make her a barrister is ridiculed by his wife Saramma. Her response indicates the attitudes and expectations of a mother-in-law in a traditional society. She says, “In a few years time, she will become a part of some other family and her mother-in-law is sure to give her a good spanking if she behaves like a barrister there” (BTRPIS 39). According to her, it is better for a girl to stay at home and learn cooking before being married off to a new family. She also shared the traditional view that girls ought to be married off as early as possible. Mathen, like his wife Saramma, begins to feel the necessity of training his daughter in managing the house which alone would help her when she sets foot in an alien household. She is brought up in tune with the gender expectations of the society.

Beauvoir uses ‘immanence’ to describe the domain assigned to women, a closed world where women remain passive and static. She writes: “She remained doomed to immanence . . . The male remained alone the incarnation of transcendence” (105). Every human being should aspire for both immanence and transcendence, but
throughout history man has denied woman the transcendant role. She is shut up, enclosed and confined to her household chores which are mostly repetitive in nature and imprison her.

Usually a daughter’s education and career prospects, more than the sons, are affected greatly by the death of her father or mother. Annamma’s mother’s death destroys all her dreams and her father’s expectations. She had to remain at home following the death of her mother since there was nobody to manage the household affairs. It is always considered the duty of a daughter to stay back in order to look after the members of the family in the event of her mother’s death. In traditional communities women are also supposed to forego opportunities for self-improvement and fulfillment if they against family interests. Mathen’s dreams of “making a barrister out of his daughter were long forgotten” (BTRPIS 49). Thus Annamma often reminds others of “a burning candle” (BTRPIS 5).

Marriage affects every aspect of one’s life. This is especially so in the case of a woman who has to shift her place of residence after her marriage in accordance with the custom of our patrilocal society. But often the secondary position accorded to women in our families prevents men from establishing healthy relationships with their spouses. In Syrian Christian families a daughter becomes a member of her husband’s family when she is married. “Once the dowry was given to the groom’s parents, she had no more right or claim to anything, whatsoever, in her father’s house. Her surname was changed; her identity merged with that of her husband. A son, on the other hand, kept the family line alive and the family name was handed down from one generation to the next” (BTRPIS 28). Mathen also thinks that it is better for Annamma to undertake household duties because such a training would stand her in good stead when she set foot in an alien household which would become her future home (BTRPIS 49).
In a Syrian Christian family, all decisions are taken by the father including decisions regarding the marriage of his daughters. Mathen’s decision to fix the alliance without even asking his daughter’s permission is in strict conformity with his patriarchal attitude. He, being the patriarch, is least mindful of the sentiments and expectations of his daughter. The meeting of the boy and the girl was not even considered necessary. It was “one minor thing” (BTRPIS 72) and was a trifle in a Syrian Christian family when the families had mutually approved the proposal. Women never dared to question the authority of their fathers. Here as well the two families agreed upon the dowry and everything else remained insignificant. The boy, a medical student in England, hailed from an ancient, aristocratic, and affluent family, like Ponnumpurackal family, with a nineteen hundred year old Syrian Christian heritage.

Mathen considers his wife to be the progenitor of his children. This is clear from his attitude. He was proud of his “little wife who had gifted him three fine sons” (BTRPIS 26). Mathen, who enters into an illicit relationship with a tribal girl while he was on his hunting expeditions, violently opposes his daughter’s relationship with an untouchable. This is a clear evidence of the double standards adopted by men.

Patriarchal authority gets a major jolt when Annamma defies her father’s decision by announcing her love affair with Thoma, the son of his untouchable farm labourer Joshua, who had saved her from the dangerous waters of Pampa. All the farm labourers lived in tidy little huts on the Ponnumpurackal land and got food, shelter and security for the work done and services rendered. They in turn, helped the women of the household in the kitchen though they were not allowed to cook certain foods where direct contact with the food was required. Though they were converted to Christianity, the Syrian Christians still treated them disdainfully. Joshua and the others who worked
on the farm were *pulayas* whose ancestors sought refuge in Christianity thinking that they would be relieved of the stigma of untouchability. Christianity was their last bastion to erase the stigma of untouchability from their lives. But the caste feeling reigned supreme among the Syrian Christians and they never encouraged the merging of the two streams. The feeling that they are the descendents of Nambootiri Brahmins made them feel that they are a class apart. “Some of the traditions of their nineteen hundred year old pre-Christian, high caste ancestry still remained in the lives of the Syrian Christians” (BTRPIS 41). The high caste ancestry and caste feelings still remain in the lives of Syrian Christians.

Thoma’s education too confirms his belief in the superiority of one class and the servitude of the other. He learns that all people are not created equal and money is a great factor in one’s social acceptability. The relation that existed between the feudal and the tenant class is evident from the relationship between the Ponnumpurackal family and the members of the tenant class.

The colonial rule witnessed the prosperity of Christians. During the colonial rule, Ponnumpurackal family acquired land in the High ranges where they grew rubber, cardamom and coffee. Syrian Christians living in mid-Travancore moved to the northern parts of Kerala to acquire uncultivated land and toiled day and night resulting in their prosperity. Some were forced to move to the north as the division of paternal property left them with only a meagre share which was not sufficient to undertake any kind of cultivation. The success stories of the early migrants motivated the later generation to try their luck and this exodus still continues. The vast property made many families, like Mathen’s, to seek the help of farm labourers. To ensure the easy availability of such labourers, a few cents of land were allotted to them and they lived on their master’s estate. Such farm hands had no legal claim on the land and they did
all the work their master demanded of them in return for food, shelter and security. Many land owners were very cruel towards their workers and they were treated worse than slaves. But Mathen was quite different from other land owners and he even arranged the marriage of their daughters if they were sincere and dedicated in their services. Strict compliance to social rules was demanded of them. Thoma’s dream of a classless, casteless society, an Eden, a paradise on earth with Annamma points to this dream of everyone who is deprived of the basic right to love and get loved.

The sign of change in the feudal-tenant relationship is visible in the attitude of the ‘dissenters’ who wanted to demand an explanation from Mathen about the whereabouts of Thoma but failed because they knew that they would be silenced forever. Joshua’s advice to his son that happiness in this world can be found only by one who is wise enough to identify his place in the society points to the fact that it is foolish to question and cross caste boundaries. Both Annamma and Thoma violated this social code and had to pay heavily for that.

Caste-conscious and caste-prejudiced Syrian Christian families, especially a family like Ponnumpurackal, would not approve of their daughter to defy the rules and conventions that society and family had imposed on her. It is something unimaginable for a daughter to love an uneducated, untouchable and boorish boy when her father is on the hunt for eligible doctors and barristers from wealthy, aristocratic and ancient Syrian Christian families. Annamma failed to inculcate the unwritten rules and values of the family as well as of the society including the feudal arrangements prevalent on the farm. “The do’s and don’ts that society demanded of her” (BTRPIS 80).

Annamma forgets all conventions and taboos, and indulges in a physical relationship with Thoma. “From that moment, there was no looking back. The conventions were broken. The age old unwritten rules of the family were broken. The
Don’ts became Dos. the Dos became Don’ts. But she no longer cared” (BTRPIS 71). As a liberated and independent woman, she defiantly rejects the doctor’s proposal and shocks her father by announcing her love for Thoma. Mathen began to find his world and dreams falling to pieces. The age old rules of the family were broken and its reputation was tarnished forever by her misdeeds.

Annamma shows courage by deciding to resist any attempt by her father to destroy the innocent child in her womb. She also takes the bold step to leave the place which makes her captive. She decides not to stay with her father anymore as she does feel at home even in her own house and leaves for Munnar where she undertakes a teacher training course. This enables her to stand on her own feet and she becomes a teacher in an Anglo-Indian Nursery school in Munnar. These decisions helped her to tide over the crisis and regain her lost spirits and energy. She asserts her individuality by deciding not to marry. Her decision to find out the whereabouts of his son also proves that she is a powerful woman and her grand niece comments, “I was moved by her determination” (BTRPIS 127).

The failure of parents to treat their children as equals often leads to family problems. The narrator’s grandmother, Mariamma, sister of Annamma, is two years younger to Annamma. Being the first girl to be born after the birth of three sons, Mathen and his wife Saramma loved her immensely. But when Mariamma was born she was not given the care and affection which Annamma received. Mathen endearingly calls Annamma ‘Annu’ and Mariamma has a grudge against her sister for being the darling of their father. Her father’s partiality hurt her much and she felt as though a heavy burden had been placed in her heart. Mariamma was more or less an introvert which made her like the kitchen and household activities like embroidering neat little flowers on table cloth and pillow covers. And the remaining time was spent
fruitfully in reading The Bible. Annamma was different from her sister. She was interested in political and social affairs. The British rule, the Swadeshi Movement, Gandhiji, Nehru and Bose occupied her mind. She objected to Gandhiji’s non-violence as it was not an answer to machine guns and bombs.

Religion had an enormous control over women of the early period in streamlining their actions. A woman’s place in the family hierarchy was also dependent on her exemplary behaviour like safeguarding the purity of her tribe and the purity of her body. As a result of this, all kinds of violations including cultural and social are seen in relation to religious violations. Annamma did not want to follow the rules of institutionalized religion. Though she wanted to question the sanctity of many religious practices the pull of religion was so great that she felt guilty for her actions. She felt closer to Mother Nature. She felt closer to God here, rather than inside the church. She felt her guilty consciousness calling her “Sinner! Sinner!” (BTRPIS 87). She felt shame and self-abhorrence. She felt that her body was no longer a symbol of purity but something moved by animal instincts. “There was no escape from the defiled body that housed her mind and soul. The mundu–chatta – the spotless white dress she wore as a symbol of the purity and modesty of a Syrian Christian woman seemed to be mocking at her. White-washed tomb. Decaying inside” (BTRPIS 88). She shudders at the thought that future generations would accuse her for her misdeeds.

A highly conservative community expects its women to strictly adhere to the customs and practices of its religion. Annamma’s habit of using sandalwood paste and vermilion bindis on her forehead during Onam season was strongly disapproved by Mariamma as “paganish” (BTRPIS 48) tendencies. Being a Syrian Christian by birth, she was not supposed to ignore the sanctity of the holy water by using any paste or powder.
If matrimony is a refuge for a traditional woman, Annamma resists accepting this patriarchal injunction. Her decision to not to marry anybody leaves her father greatly shocked. Mathen could not get any proposal from an aristocratic and affluent family like his for his daughter Mariamma and had to compromise at many levels. This was partly due to the “Annamma scandal” (BTRPIS 103) and partly because in changed times people no longer attached great importance to family tradition and name. Mathen could only get a graduate school teacher from a less aristocratic and less affluent family.

The attitude of a mother-in-law can pose serious threats to the son-daughter-in-law relationship. Mariamma’s mother-in-law was an “aggressive woman” (BTRPIS 103) who controlled everybody in the family including her husband. Mariamma’s father, Mathen, was the supreme authority in her family. So she could not adjust herself to her domineering mother-in-law. Her brothers-in-law and their scheming wives made her life miserable. Her mother-in-law, while being proud of her daughter-in-law’s ancestry and family background, also made use of every opportunity to taunt her so that she would not put on airs in her new familial set up. She never realised that she was doing more harm than good to their relationship.

The death of the husband is a turning event in the life of a woman. This often results in her being considered an outcaste in her husband’s family. Most often her natal family does not welcome her as she is already married off by giving dowry which amounts to her share of paternal property. But the Ponnumpurackal family accepts Marimma with her children and she never returns to her husband’s family. When Mariamma later dies in childbirth, Annamma takes the bold step to come back to her home to look after her sister’s children. “This is how she became mother to her sister’s
children. Poor little orphans . . . that was how she became a mother to my father and his two sisters. And a grandmother to me and my cousins” (BTRPIS 106).

The loss of children seriously affects one’s mental and psychological condition as well as human relationships. The loss of Varghese, to a foreigner, the death of Unni in an accident and the loss of Kurien leave Mathen shattered, making him unable to speak or write during his last days. Annamma thought that her father was paying heavily for his atrocities against Joshua’s family. The death of the narrator’s father in a car accident while she was only four brings her unending sorrows. Her mother withdraws into a world of her own, grieving in silence.

Annamma’s friend Pushpa too, is the daughter of Judge P.N.K. Nair, values dearly an individual’s freedom and rights. She is the representative of those women who discarded their families and friends to fight for the nation’s freedom. She discarded her golden anklets and nose-ring as they symbolized bondage or slavery. Her decision to discard her golden anklets and nose-ring is suggestive of the kind of femininity which she wants to abrogate as it entails bondage or slavery to patriarchal values and conditioning. She too discarded the ‘security’ offered by matrimony. She became an active member of the women’s wing of the INA and served in the Jhansi Regiment and fought for the freedom of her country and returns to Kuttanad to live like a spinster.

Women of the earlier period had their own ways and means of protest against patriarchal dictates. Annamma protested by backing out of marital relationships when the patriarchal society refused to accept and acknowledge her feelings and dreams. She was so determined that she waited for nearly six decades to see her child. For Pushpa, enjoyed freedom by joining the freedom struggle. Her struggle for the nation’s freedom is also symbolic of her struggle for individual freedom and autonomy.
The unnamed narrator of the novel is the grand daughter of Annamma’s sister Saramma and a representative of the modern women who consider ancestry and tradition as ‘trivial matters’. She too is stubborn and adamant like her grand aunt and flouted traditions and conventions of the family and society. Her marriage to Karun, a doctor who hailed from Tamil Nadu, created a great uproar in the family. According to her, his parents were simple, straight forward, rustic people who could be relied upon. Even though she was happy to find the man of her dreams, who was kind and compassionate, her mother could not accept him as he was not a Syrian Christian. But she thinks that she could not have found a better husband. Amma insisted that he should be either a Christian or a Brahmin. But according to her, her mother could not understand that beyond these trivial matters, there were things like love, concern, and compatibility which could not be guaranteed in a marriage she would arrange for me. I was dead against the idea of spending the rest of my life with someone, who, when he tied the knot, knew nothing about me other than my name, my family name and the dowry I would bring (his price-tag!). I had to fall in love if I were to marry at all. (BTRPIS 114)

Her courage to assert her independence and individuality by marrying a man of her choice made the custodians of tradition and ancestry label her a rebel. The union of two equal minds in marriage helps both to find emotional fulfillment and according to her he “never behaved like a typical husband. We behaved like best friends. We quarrelled, we made up, we laughed, we cried. Yet we remained, and still remain, the best of friends” (BTRPIS 114). Even though her mother could not forgive her for what she had done, Annammachi blessed their union and stood by her in her hour of need. The conservative family’s doors are closed to Karun and even after many years he is
still an unwelcome guest in the Gold House. He sets foot on the Ponnumpurackal family for the first time, as an uninvited guest, at the time of Annammachi’s funeral.

The arrival of the Gulf money during the latter half of the nineteenth century changed the social condition and attitudes of people. The large number of Keralites working abroad enriched the state coffer and their economic stability enabled them to fulfil their dreams like providing better education for their children, construction of splendid houses and better marital alliances for their children. This *nouveau riche* sent their children to famous institutions in Madras, Bangalore and Delhi.

One such group was found by the narrator during her train journey from Madras to Changanacherry. They were the daughters of rich Gulf-Malayalee parents who “could afford to buy ‘careers’ for their sons and ‘husbands’ for their daughters” (BTRPIS 9). They were the children of the new rising class who believed that their hard earned money could buy them ‘heritage’. The changes in the attitudes of the youth are also clear from their attitude and dress. Their communication gap with the older generation and their indifference to others are clear from the statement of the narrator, “The girls appeared to be unaware of the people in the compartment” (BTRPIS 10).

Like Anita Nair who describes the pathetic condition of Achuthan Nair and his death in *The Better Man*, Jose also describes the pathetic death of Mathen, the patriarch of the Ponnumpurackal family. He was often seen crying and trying desperately to convey something to Annamma but failed miserably. A paralytic stroke made him an invalid who could neither speak nor write and he had a miserable death. The person who was defiant and resistant to change meets with a tragic death for his callousness and arrogance.
The Gold House had not changed much, according to the narrator, and this shows that basic attitudinal changes have not taken place. But change is apparent in externalities like the dress code and certain other practices. But people cannot be resistant to change for a long time. Nothing is free from change, and so is Ponnumpurackal. Their values too have undergone changes thus allowing their ‘vagabond’ daughters to visit them.

The narrator admits that times have changed. Otherwise she would not have gained entry into the Ponnumpurackal house after her disputed marriage with a ‘low caste’ doctor. The poor farm folk who depended on the Ponnumpurackal household for their livelihood have become rich. Education and employment brought an end to the feudal system. The house and the land surrounding the Ponnumpurackal house had been bought by them with the help of money earned from foreign countries. The Ponnumpurackal estate would be partitioned and sold as there were no sons to inherit the property. Newly educated, rich people, without any pedigree, would be rewriting history. Jose writes:

New societies would spring up in a new world where a person is not judged based on his pedigrees but on his personality. In a new world where families no longer take interest in parading dynastic pedigrees or aristocratic connections. Academic achievements and high-powered careers would overpower the old concepts that Mathen had so passionately clung to. Eventually, the so-called patricians would associate and merge with parvenus. (BTRPIS 138)

Mathen was very proud of his ancestry and liked to think of himself as a great historian. Mathen’s much boasted book Kudumbacharitram (History of the Family) was an important record made by a Christian family. The book recorded the success
and contributions of men of that family. Probably that is why his daughter Annammachi ridicules the idea of writing such a book which boasts of only men’s success. But such a ‘master’ narrative which records the ventures of those illustrious forefathers would turn to dust (BTRPIS 138) in course of time. All patriarchal and hegemonic narratives would perish when an educated and liberated society assumes power and supremacy.

The suppressed womanhood finds its emergence in the new generation. The Ponnumpurackal family which boasted of its patrilineal tradition eventually comes to be dominated by women in the coming generations. The narrator asserts this unequivocally by remarking that “Daughters of Mathen. Their daughters. And their daughters. And their daughters. No son. To keep the Ponnumpurackal flag flying high through the coming centuries” (BTRPIS 135).

Though a lot of changes took place in the social and political spheres of the period, they have not changed the condition of women much as the people of the period were deeply embedded in age-old customs and practices. Men decided and dictated everything and women were to follow their orders. They had to adhere to strict caste practices and the violation led to untold miseries in the lives of women. Annammachi failed to live according to the expectations of the social and familial norms and she suffered for her ‘misdeeds’.

The novel ends with the rise of women and their empowerment in the twentieth century. The narrator, the representative woman of the third phase, values freedom and friendship in marriage. She hates to marry a man who attaches great importance to money and family tradition. She realizes that love is the most essential aspect in building up a good husband-wife relationship. Her husband is not a male chauvinist who forces his wife to adhere to strict patriarchal stricures. Even though there are
minor hiccups in their lives their camaraderie and mutual understanding enable them to sort out issues and differences. She is thus an empowered woman of the modern period.

*The Better Man* by Anita Nair

(Period - Second World War to Babri Masjid demolition)

Anita Nair’s first novel *The Better Man*, set in a fictitious village called Kaikurussi in Kerala, explores the theme of relationships, loyalty, betrayal and self-fulfilment. It also deals with the caste issues of the times and the sufferings of women during that period. But Nair is more concerned about the suffering and status of women in their families in the early part of the twentieth century. The novel has as its protagonist a retired government employee called Mukundan who has been forced by circumstances to return to his village Kaikurussi, an imaginary village in the northern part of Kerala, from which he had fled when he was eighteen in order to escape the tyranny of his father. Though the novel traces the growth and the eventual redemption of timid Mukundan into a better man with courage and self-confidence, it subtly highlights the idea that the domineering nature of his father and the disharmony in his parents’ marital life are the real reasons for his failure in life. His mother Paru Kutty, who had to suffer humiliation and ill treatment from her husband, could not escape the brutality of her husband as her son failed to rescue her from the cruelty of his father. The only ray of hope and channel of escape for her is her son whose lack of will power destroys all her hopes.

A traditional Indian mother looks up to her son for physical and emotional support. Mukundan’s mother is a victim of male cruelty and rejection. Her sufferings are revealed through Mukundan’s thoughts, dreams and hallucinations and they are so vivid and powerful that his very existence is shaken by such haunting thoughts. 

The
inability and indifference of the younger generation, on whom women place their hopes
to challenge physical and psychological abuses of the powerful, shatter them. The last
words of his suffering mother, “Take me with you, son. I am so unhappy here” (TBM
31) haunt him relentlessly.

Mukundan suspects his father’s hand in his mother’s death. He hears the voice
of his mother revealing the secret of her death, “I want you to know the fear I felt when
a hand smashed into my back, pushing me down. I want you to know what I saw when
the floor reached out to slam my life away. I want you to feel the anguish I felt as I
realized I was going to die before my time” (TBM 32). She asks Mukundan to see
what he and his father did to her by showing the deep wound on her skull. The
memory of his mother “gasping for life as her blood drained away” (TBM 30) haunts
him. His mother accuses him of being a chip off the old block. Thus he is tormented
by the memory of his mother who was treated by her husband very badly and his failure
and negligence in protecting her.

Mukundan is devastated by the thought of his failure to support and take care of
his mother, for he alone could have saved her. He imagines his mother finding fault
with him for his callousness. “Where were you when I needed you? You could have
rescued me, but you chose not to” (TBM 31). Her earnest request to her son to take her
away to a safe place far away from her husband fails as he is scared to confront his
father, and thus leaves her all alone at his father’s mercy. So whatever be his
justification for not taking care of his mother, his mother vehemently criticizes the
attitude of her husband and son in not helping the weak and the defenceless. According
to Elisabeth Bumiller, “The great tragedy of many Indian women was their profound
powerlessness to control any aspect of their lives” (76).
Women of the older generation were forced to serve the interests of their husbands and society, and many considered them their duty and responsibility. Paru Kutty too would have been content to perform her traditional wifely role had her husband not entered into illicit relationships. Her husband’s attitude to her even after four years of separation is cruel and when he returned from Burma, “he shot her an angry look and greeted her after four years of separation with a growl” (TBM 69). According to Krishnan Nair, his mother could have prevented the ill-treatment and humiliation, but she chose to remain a victim. She wanted to take revenge for the “years of tyranny” (TBM 75) her husband had subjected her to. But she proves that she is truly traditional in her attitudes and behaviour. The traditional image of an enduring mother prevents her from questioning his behaviour.

According to Beauvoir, even though a woman is a free and autonomous being like any creature, she is often pleased to accept the status of the ‘Other’. She argues that the most important obstacle to a woman’s freedom is not her biology or the political, legal and economic constraints rather it is the whole process by which femininity is constructed in the society.

The house, being a place of women’s entrapment, many women writers are interested in giving a graphic representation of the house. The portrayal of the house in a dilapidated and unclean condition needing much energy and attention to revive it reveals the neglected human lives in it, especially of women. The neglected walls of Mukundan’s house, with their cracks and degradation, are symbolic of the neglected human lives and relationships. Mukundan realizes that the front yard with its grass, weeds and green flourish betray to the world that “here was a home that had no hope; here was a family plunged in debt; here was desperation and unhappiness” (TBM 34). Expressions such as “the house continued to wear the look of a chronic sufferer” (TBM
“This house has been asleep far too long” (TBM 40), “the murky gloom that lay thick in and around the house” (TBM 41), “Like an insatiable female ghoul . . .” (TBM 40) and “a mammoth house resounding with emptiness . . .” (TBM 82) vividly portray the absence of warm human relationships and fear and terror associated with the house. According to Mukundan, “the great sadness within this house has seeped into the walls” (TBM 88) and it was like “a woman who sat downcast, streaming rivulets of pain” (TBM 88). To Bhasi, the grime and dirt that clung to the house are suggestive of the inner dirt and grievances suffered by its inmates. Each individual in this house was like a “hunted animal” (TBM 12) and the large “monstrous house” (TBM 27) would never make him feel at home. Everything and everybody in the house including the pictures on the wall emitted “the mustiness of neglect” (TBM 28).

The neglected house and its frightening silence are objective correlatives which powerfully bring out the painful sufferings of the women inside. Such images as “the splintering of silence” (TBM 25), “a creaking of the old wood as if it were in pain” (TBM 25), “the fridge hummed like a giant beast slumbering, breathing heavily” (TBM 41) and “the house raised its hooded eyelids and peered at him” (TBM 49) as well as the immobile, silent picture of Balammavan, Ammumma and his three Cheriyammas are highly suggestive and bring out the sufferings of the women trapped inside. The cruelty of the man and the suffering of the women merge with the image of the house.

The 1970 “Redstockings Manifesto” declared:

Women are an oppressed class. We identify the agents of our oppression as men. Male supremacy is the oldest, most basic form of domination . . . All power structures throughout history have been male-dominated and male-oriented. Men have controlled all political, economic and cultural institutions and backed up this control with
physical force. They have used their power to keep women in an inferior position. *All men receive economic, sexual and psychological benefits from male supremacy. All men have oppressed women.* (qtd. in Anju Bindra 40)

Family was indeed a place of confinement to many women of the earlier generation. The chances of escape from their painful marital relationships were less as they had to depend completely on their husbands. They had to toil and struggle in order to fulfil the idealised role of the wife and mother. What the society expected from a wife or mother was patient suffering and unquestioning acceptance of male authority to fulfil the role of a *pativrata*. Even though Paru Kutty inherited property, it was completely under the control of her husband because even in a joint family system it was the elder male who controlled the wealth of the family.

Achuthan Nair uses every opportunity to belittle and dehumanize his wife and even attributes an element of madness to her family. He boasts of his heritage and prides in being a member of a family which comprises capable and hard working men unlike Paru Kutty’s who have “vagrant streaks” (TBM 16) among them. The narration of his sexual exploits with Ammini has the same purpose.

An Indian woman is confined to her private space whereas a man is always a public figure and occupies the public space. Achuthan Nair considers himself to be a man of the world and restricts Paru Kutty’s contact with her kith and kin. The loss or denial of warmth and affection of her kith and kin seriously affects her well-being.

Achuthan Nair who left his wife for another woman is a symbol of patriarchal power. Paru Kutty was too frightened to question his authority including his illicit relationship. The inconsiderate Achuthan Nair is unable to understand the vulnerability
of a pregnant woman and considers her an encumbrance when she fails to accompany him to Burma.

Paru Kutty stands for the earlier generation of women who suffered everything in silence. All women in the household including his “commiserating aunts” (TBM 49) were afraid of Achuthan Nair. Paru Kutty shows the last remnants of courage when Achuthan Nair announces his decision to bring Ammini, his concubine, to their house. She overcomes her cowardice and vehemently protests. She declares, “I am willing to live with the shame of your taking a mistress. But I am not going to let you flaunt how little I mean to you. I am your wife and I insist you treat me with the respect due to me” (TBM 74). She declares that he will be able to bring his concubine only over her dead body. She says, “For as long as I’m alive, I will decide who lives in this house and who doesn’t” (TBM 74). Achuthan Nair is shocked by her protests, for he had “never heard her use that tone with him” (TBM 74).

Achuthan Nair wanted to assert his authority and power not only at home but also in the public domain. In Kaikurassi, he is respected by everybody and nobody questioned him. His attitude was: “Here is a man who has seen the world. Here is a man who is to be respected. Here is a man whose authority is not to be questioned. The wooden clogs seemed to echo these declarations with every step” (TBM 70). Even Krishnan Nair is nervous and stammers when he speaks to Achuthan Nair. Feudal mentality reigns supreme in him and he is a master of oppression. His philosophy of life violates the moral and ethical codes of family relationships. This is clear from his advice to his son:

The moment you start thinking of others, there is no way you’ll reach anywhere. In this world no one can be responsible for anyone else. Protect yourself first. Then, if it doesn’t involve risking your life, you
can help someone else. A survivor is someone who is selfish. There is nothing to be ashamed of in it. Anyway, I think selflessness is a much overrated virtue. (TBM 72)

Child rearing is considered the duty of a mother by the patriarchal society and any failure in discharging this traditional obligation is viewed as a serious offence. Achuthan Nair finds fault with Paru Kutty for erring in her traditional role of a mother. When Mukundan sees his father for the first time at the age of four his fear drives him to seek protection behind a pillar. Achuthan Nair criticizes Paru Kutty for turning their son into a pathetic creature. But he conveniently ignores the fact that he is largely responsible for this pitiable condition of the child.

Achuthan Nair considers a woman an object to satisfy his physical and sexual needs. His utter callousness is seen when he narrates to his wife his sexual exploits with Ammini, his concubine. According to him, “Ammini was a real woman, responsive to his needs and understanding of his demands, unlike the cowering, weak, lifeless creature, he was married to” (TBM 78). According to Beauvoir, man reduces woman to sex. “Absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her: she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—She is the Other” (16). Even his decision to buy a piece of land opposite Paru Kutty’s house to build his own house to live with Ammini proves that he uses every opportunity to humiliate and torment her.

Paru Kutty, a faithful and submissive wife, registers her protests not by leaving her husband and child or by entering into extra-marital relationships but by resorting to mild forms of protest like dousing the lantern that lit the front yard making it difficult for Achuthan Nair to go for bathing in the enclosed pond at the bottom of the garden. She also cuts down an almond tree planted by him and in its place planted a
champakam plant. She also shows her animosity and contempt for him by letting his items gather dust. This attitude is clearly visible when she finds joy in watching Devayani’s son play with her husband’s wooden clogs, the symbol of his authority and tyrannical nature.

Paru Kutty’s family followed the matrilineal system. She stored paddy from her inherited fields into the macch and the huge house could accommodate many people. Since she has her own house and means of livelihood, she is not affected by the departure of Achuthan Nair. But even this system could not give her adequate safety and security. By the time Mukundan was born, the system as such did not exist. He listens to the stories narrated by his mother about his grandmas, granduncles and grandaunts (TBM 197) who lived with her. When Mukundan took charge of the affairs of the family, he too contributes his share to the disintegration of the tharavad. He sells a part of the paddy field to Powerhouse Ramakrishnan, leaving hardly two acres of ancestral property.

The women of the second phase are also guided by patriarchal values and gender stereotypes. But change is visible in their attitudes and practices. They try to question the dehumanizing practices and gender bias of our society. They value freedom and individuality, and object to their confinement. They react only when their sufferings become unbearable.

Meenakshi, Mukundan’s cousin in The Better Man, is a product of a gendered society. Her mother has a major role in inculcating gender-based values in her daughter. The close knit-relationship between Mukundan and Meenakshi is not allowed to develop because, according to her mother, it is always a woman who is susceptible to danger in her relationship with a man. To her, “whether the leaf fell on the thorn or thorn fell on the leaf, it was the leaf that was hurt for life” (TBM 54). Her
mother exhorts her to give up her books and learn cooking. She tells her: “Put aside your books and fancy talk. It is time you learned to cook” (TBM 54). Her boredom due to her confinement forces her to seek an avenue of escape but it gets materialized only very late.

The novelist uses Meenakshi to express her views about gender discrimination in our society and a woman’s attempt to escape from this situation. If one is able to climb the Pulmooth mountain he is considered a ‘man’ by the villagers. Meenakshi too climbs the mountain proving that a woman too is capable of achieving difficult tasks. Meenakshi joins the Naxalite movement to register her protests against the patriarchal and feudal systems which exploit the weaker sections of the society including women. These women were courageous enough to lay down their lives for their cause. To the Naxalites, “Achuthan Nair was the system, and these were some ways of upsetting what he represented” (TBM 56). He was considered a “Feudal landlord. Tyrant. Master of oppression” (TBM 56).

Marriage offered a lot of promises and hopes to traditional women. Meenakshi views her marriage with Balan, a Kathakali dancer, as an attempt “to escape the prison” (TBM 57). But he was “an errant husband” (TBM 58) who eventually deserted her. She being a proud woman wants to prove that she can live without the support of a man and runs a crèche and later a shop to support herself and her child. Meenakshi, on hearing the news about her husband’s deteriorating physical condition, at first wanted to ignore and punish him for all the years of loneliness she had suffered. But she forgives and takes him to an Ayurvedic centre even though he was an unfaithful husband. She prides in being a faithful wife to her husband and becomes an insurance agent to collect money for her husband’s treatment. Her painful experiences had changed her into a strong woman and Mukundan is struck by “the streak of steel that
ran within her, straightening her back, tilting her head high, and sealing the cracks in her much-broken heart” (TBM 62).

The male chauvinist society exploits the services of women to promote its interests without giving them freedom and opportunities for their progress. Meenakshi is fed up with her life in “the enormous old house and its inmates who had leched on her forever” (TBM 249). She has given them the best years of her life and there is nothing left in her. She shows courage and determination when she decides to take up the post of the matron of a hostel for working women in Thrissur. But she leaves at a time when her son and daughter-in-law can manage the house on their own and her husband and mother can look after themselves. She thus fulfils the role of a daughter, wife and mother.

Patriarchal society’s partisan attitude towards men is questioned by Meenakshi. She envies the freedom enjoyed by men like Mukundan and their “ability to exist without being enmeshed in other people’s lives” (TBM 250). She wanted to be in that state without thinking of anything or anyone except herself. But she realises that though her life is “as brittle as an eggshell” (TBM 58), she gradually tries to take control of her life. She is not able to find happiness in life as a daughter or a wife or even as a mother. She wants to escape the bondage of marriage which puts enormous burden and responsibilities on women. But she goes in search of her freedom only after fulfilling her wifely and motherly duties. She is a woman who is torn between the restrictions of tradition and the pull of modernity.

In the novel, Anjana is the niece of K.M. Nair, Mukundan’s boss. She was brought up in a liberal atmosphere by her parents and they were wise enough to educate her to become a school teacher. On the day Anjana turned twenty seven she loses her independence in the name of marriage. Though she steps into Ravindran’s home with a
lot of dreams she becomes a victim of injustice perpetrated by her irritable husband, and life becomes a bed of thorns for her. Her desire for his care and affection is thwarted by his callousness and indifference. Her attempts to impress him by giving him the best, including the best food, turn out to be a failure. Anjana, well trained in gender stereotypes and in conventional upbringing, worships her husband. She has to be a devoted and faithful wife because “He was her husband. It was up to her to see to it that he was happy always” (TBM 227). Beauvoir argues that women are taught to believe that a woman’s fulfilment is through her husband. She gradually believes that it is by fulfilling man’s conception of woman that she will be able to increase her worth as a human being.

Like Achuthan Nair, Anjana’s husband also considers a woman an object to satisfy his lust in the name of connubial rights. He uses her body “with a brutality that scared her” (TBM 232). Even the rare physical union left her “bruised in spirit and body, unsatiated, and feeling strangely empty” (TBM 228). There was little conversation between them. According to Millet, rape or sexual assault is another form of violent force used by patriarchy. “In rape, the emotions of aggression, hatred, contempt, and the desire to break or violate personality, take a form consummately appropriate to sexual politics” (44). So sadism is associated with the male or ‘the masculine role’ and victimization with the female or ‘the feminine role’.

The traditional notion that a woman is ignorant and unintelligent is found in Ravindran when he ridicules her: “You won’t understand, what I ‘m talking about” (TBM 228). The same technique is used by him when he blames the trade unions for his failure in business. But Anjana is sure that it is his failure to garner the support of his people that led to his failure in business.
Physical violence becomes a ploy to hide man’s weakness and failures. For his lack of confidence and failures in business, he punishes Anjana brutally. The lack of communication and the growing silence between them add to her loneliness and despair. A man of hollow words and ideas, he finds fault with her for trivial things. On looking at the bruised face of Anjana, her father becomes violent and tells him:

When I gave you my daughter’s hand in marriage, it was with the hope that you would love her. Cherish and protect her for the rest of her life. If all you intend to do is hurt her, and make her unhappy, then there is no need for such a relationship. My daughter can manage very well without a husband like you. If you ever hurt my daughter again, I’ll throw you out of this house. (TBM 232)

She breaks her passivity and begins to retaliate and assert her individuality. The extreme suffering and neglect experienced by her in her married life force her “to erase all traces of her husband. Banish him from her life once and for all” (TBM 237). She wants to break down the male notion that just because they are husband and wife in the eyes of the law he can treat her as he pleases. To Anjana, many men consider their wives to be mere servants and whores. She remarks, “a prostitute has more rights than I have in this marriage. At least she gets paid for her services, and she can say no if she wants to. I have no such choices in the matter” (TBM 243). Ultimately she shows courage in seeking a divorce to bail herself out of this unfulfilling relationship.

Power shared by husband and wife would lead to greater marital happiness. Bhasi’s wife, Damayanti, was a widow when he married her and they had a happy life. He gave importance to family relationships. Damayanti is also a typical traditional woman who wants to please her husband. But Mukundan is surprised by Bhasi’s reluctance to talk about his wife and child. She is a self-contained woman and that
scares Bhasi. The feeling that she would never outgrow him gives him great satisfaction and he realises that he is the most important person in her life. She, being a widow, is forced to depend on him. The sage Manu did not allow remarriage for a widow. He declared: “When her husband is dead she may fast as much as she likes, (living) on auspicious flowers, roots and fruits, but she should not even mention the name of another man” (Manu 115). But the women of the second phase are bold enough to break this stereotype.

Kaikurussi is a microcosm of Kerala. According to Bhasi, Kaikurussi is a typical village where women “sound old and weary by the time they are twenty five . . . it is because they feel they are destined to a lifelong tedium of chores, a monotony that is more mind-glazing than backbreaking” (TBM 125). Valsala, the wife of ageing school master Prabhakaran, was caught up in her chores. The house and the surroundings became her prison walls keeping her captive for the last twenty three years. Her eyes are devoid of any emotion and her voice is that “of a woman who had no more dreams” (TBM 126) and expectations from life. Valsala who had never known “an awakening of her senses” (TBM 128) falls in love with Sridharan, their neighbour. She wanted to flee from her feeble old husband because Sridharan made her feel like a woman.

Prabhakaran Master never cared to understand her feelings and desires, and thus failed to fulfil her expectations. He was unmindful of his wife’s physical and emotional needs. His inability to father a child and his anxiety caused by his illnesses gradually force her to drift away from her husband. According to her, “I am jut forty years old. I don’t want to be pushed into old age before it is time. I want to live. I want passion. I want to know ecstasy, she told herself night after night” (TBM 131).
She is trapped in a marriage with a man who is twelve years senior to her and wanted to flee from this captive existence.

Valsala rebels by making drastic changes in her cooking. She knows the digestive problems of her husband but revives her old recipes and experiments with new ones like using ghee instead of oil. She is not concerned about his health even though he complains of indigestion. She also protests by buying expensive fish and meat when he wanted to avoid frivolous expenses. “Richness of excess” (TBM 132) marked every aspect of her life. Her passion for life is clear from her desire to have spicy food. Though he wanted to dispense with displays of ostentation, she revels in such things. But she prolongs the otherwise strange and strained marital relationship because of his landed property, his retirement benefits and the sizeable LIC Policy, for all of which she was the sole inheritor. But Valsala, not being able to give up Sridharan, becomes an accomplice in murdering her husband.

Nair presents many of her women characters as stronger than men. Paru Kutty and Damayanti suffer a lot but accept their suffering because they attach a lot of importance to marital relationships. Besides, they consider it their duty to fulfill the patriarchal and gender expectations of the society. But characters like Meenakshi, Anjana and Valsala are shown to grow in strength and courage with their suffering. As long as Paru Kutty is alive, she never allows Achuthan Nair to bring his concubine to her house. Anjana is stronger than Mukundan and “All through their relationship, she had been the one to take risks, to forge ahead while he had walked a step behind, afraid, unsure” (TBM 355). She tells Mukundan, “You are a coward. A smug and completely self-absorbed coward who puts himself before anyone else and then uses his own feebleness of character to excuse it . . . You disgust me” (TBM 323). Mukundan shows manly qualities very late in his life. The community hall built by Power House
Ramakrishnan is a symbol of his failure. He realises that it was “a statement of his weakness, his cowardice, and his lack of integrity . . . His failure as a friend, as a lover. As a man” (TBM 356).

Balan and Achuthan Nair long for the companionship of their wives when they are physically weak. When Balan became too weak he writes to Meenakshi asking for forgiveness and beseeching her to at least visit him. Meenakshi rejects the sympathy of even her aunts for she was a very proud woman - a woman with “handsome spirit” (TBM 64). Prabhakaran Master’s wife belongs to a rare category who, in order to enjoy freedom and fulfillment in life, becomes an accomplice in killing her husband.

Nothing of significance ever happens to anyone in Kaikurussi due to the absence of warm human relationships. It is a world devoid of any significant changes in the lives of people, especially of women. Almost all married women in the novel are “bored with their life” (TBM 64). People have been ill-treated, neglected and abused physically, mentally and emotionally and move around like puppets in Kaikurussi. The absence of the healing touch of love in their families forces them to seek the help of outsiders to heal their wounded self. They wanted Bhasi “to bring forth from the churned-up mud of some wrecked psyche a luminous and complete mind” (TBM 10).

Mukundan’s tyrant father crushes the individuality of his son by suppressing all his initiatives. His terrifying influence is so strong that even after his death, he still did not have the courage to read a book. His “spirit had been bruised and battered by his callous, domineering father (TBM 39). If the presence of one’s father instills courage and confidence in his son, the presence of his father drains all such qualities. He realizes the need for a woman in Mukundan’s life only when he is 58.

Even though Nair presents various social evils and practices like the caste system, she is more concerned about the condition of women and the novel is replete
with images of suffering women in a male-dominated family and society. There is also a conscious attempt on the part of the novelist to associate madness with men in contrast to the patriarchal practice of associating it with women. Achuthan Nair suffers from “senile dementia” (TBM 296) towards the end of his life and the picture of his playing with his genital organs is indeed pathetic. Moidu becomes mad and people call him “mad Moidu” and his madness is the result of his marital failure.

The conservative society attaches a lot of importance to marriage. It holds the view that a woman cannot have existence outside conjugality. This attitude has put enormous burden on women. Even the unmarried women in Kaikkurussi are looking depressed and defeated and their only reason for seeking a marital alliance is “to escape from the ignominy of spinsterhood” (TBM 64).

The novelist also tries to assert that an individual is also responsible for his/her state of affairs and one cannot completely blame the patriarchal set-up for all failures. Every woman has the right to protest and thus protect her selfhood. Anajana, though weak in the beginning, later tries to protest against the injustice and humiliation experienced by her in her married life. Thus an analysis of the women characters of the first and the second phase prove that the women of the first phase like Paru Kutty suffered in silence and broke their silence only when men violated the sexual code of the family which itself was a creation of the patriarchal society. The women of the second phase too value marital relationships but exercise their freedom to remain within wedlock or come out of it. Modern education and their spirit of independence enable them to stand on their own feet.

The women in The Better Man definitely value marital relationships and have great expectations of their married life. Saramma in By The River Pampa I Stood and Paru Kutty in The Better Man are symbols of the type of womanhood society wishes to
nurture. Both of them fulfil their traditional roles of motherhood and wifehood and are content to remain within the space allotted to them by society. Saramma and Paru Kutty are enslaved women who are happily wedded to their familial chores. Paru Kutty’s fear of her husband and her suffering is typical of the experiences of the women of the first phase. These women have effaced their identities and become instruments of the patriarchal society; hence the aptness of the title “A Name without a Face”.

The following chapter discusses Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things and Nirmala Aravind’s A Video, a Fridge and a Bride from a feminist perspective to explore the condition of women during the second phase. The increasing importance given to marriage and family and the attempts to glorify the role of women indicate that patriarchy tries to exert a lot of power during the modernist period as well.