Chapter IV

The Domestic Mystique

Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (Period: 1960s)

The second phase (1947-1980s) witnessed the advent of modernism and the greater participation of the State and other educational agencies in the field of education. Though women, reaped the fruits of education to a certain extent, the gender bias stood against their’s employment and empowerment, and the ‘domestic mystique’ taught them that they are essentially wives and mothers. The public-private divide became conspicuous and women’s bonded labour and confinement in the family became imperative to look after the needs of their employed husbands and the educational needs of children. The process of democratisation and modernisation could not do away with the traditional feminine roles including the myth and mystique of this image. The erasing of caste/community markers into one standardised masculinity and femininity led to women’s gendered burden and spatial confinement to home, and men to public affairs.

The Gulf phenomenon gradually led to a growing culture of consumerism and 1950s and 60s were also times when the transition to the nuclear family and conjugal marriage was fairly complete at least among the educated classes. The nuclear family’s emphasis on heterosexuality with its emphasis on chastity and morality helped in the effective control of women’s reproductive potential.

The process of reform of families leading to legislation in the first half of the twentieth century established the basis of patrifocal families in Kerala, profoundly affecting women’s lives. The highly gender discriminatory laws practised by the Christians including the dowry system, family’s deterrent role in denying women higher educational qualifications and the strict observance of gender and caste
distinctions led to a greater subordination of women. Thus we see that the second period is marked by women’s confinement and gender subordination.

During this period, female bonding or female homosociality was adopted as a way to threaten the patriarchal social order. Female homosocial bondings challenged the hierarchial order and presented a non-hierarchical togetherness among women. The period was also noted for its transgressive feminine sexuality. The moral domain of the family began to be questioned. Women exhibiting agency and autonomy were censured and portrayed as undesirable in a patrilineal/patrifocal family.

Arundhati Roy through her novel *The God of Small Things* captures imaginatively the social, political and cultural background of Kerala of the 1960s. Political organizations began to play a greater role during this period and many men owed allegiance to one party or the other. In the novel, Comrade Pillai and Velutha are sworn communists and Chacko is a party sympathizer. But even the presence of a revolutionary party such as the Communist party could not eradicate class and caste hierarchies that existed in Kerala during this period. Though untouchability was legally banned it could not be wiped out from the minds of people. Neither could the missionaries do that. Though the State witnessed educational progress due to the activities of the Christian missionaries, S.N.D.P. and N.S.S. they could not do much to improve the economic, educational and social progress of their women. The greater emphasis given to the dowry system and the widespread belief that family is a hallowed institution to be protected at any cost led to the marginalization and victimization of women in the family and workplace.

Roy’s *The God of Small Things* unravels the sufferings and subordination of women in a male chauvinistic society. Roy criticises the undue privileges enjoyed by men and the enslavement of women in society. The novel presents grim realities in the
lives of Syrian Christians in a tiny village called Ayemenem in Kottayam District of Kerala, where male hegemony and androcentric power relations bring about the disintegration of families. The story, though set in Ayemenem, has got a universal significance. The Booker Jury Chairperson, Gillian Beer, Professor of English at Cambridge, reading out the Booker Tribute to Roy’s book at Guild Hall stated: “With extraordinary linguistic inventiveness Arundhati Roy funnels the history of South India through the eyes of seven year old twins. The story, she says, is fundamental as well as local.”

Thus Roy, in her novel, presents a microscopic picture of Kerala through the society of Ayemenem where patriarchal value systems have been deeply entrenched among the people and thus Ayemenem becomes a symbol of all places where patriarchal structures and values reign supreme. Roy focuses on some of key gender issues like marginalization and oppression of women who have no locus standi, lack of legal and inheritance rights, marital violence and the denial of their basic human rights. The novel highlights a plethora of details concerning the problems plaguing women in a male dominated society. The author narrates the agony and ordeal of women in an apathetic world where subjugation of women still persists. The novel is thus rooted in the culture and politics of Kerala. The author portrays gendered identities that are rooted in patriarchy.

A look at the Ayemenem House shows its indifference to its women. The aloof looking appearance of the house highlights the moral decadence, emptiness, apathy and absence of human values. Its indifferent appearance and gradual degeneration, which are symbolic of the loss of moral and familial values, make the life of its inhabitants nightmarish. Roy describes it thus: “The walls, streaked with moss, had grown soft and bulged a little with dampness that seeped up from the ground . . . The house itself
looked empty. The doors and windows were closed. The front verandah bare.

Unfurnished” (TGST 1-2).

The Ayemenem House, though a grand old one, is marked by moral decadence. Its members not only maintain a distance among themselves but are also unconcerned about the public. The indifferent appearance of the house and its gradual degeneration are highly suggestive of the erosion of values in the family as well as of the region.

It was a grand old house, the Ayemenem House, but aloof looking. As though it had little to do with the people that lived in it. Like an old man with rheumy eyes watching children play, seeing only transience in their shrill elation and their whole hearted commitment to life. The steep, tiled roof had grown dark and mossy with age and rain. (TGST 165)

The members of the house, including Baby Kochamma and the housemaid Kochu Maria, have lost interest in preserving and maintaining the house. Roy writes: “Filth had laid siege to the Ayemenem house like a medieval army advancing on an enemy castle. It clotted every crevice and clung to the window panes . . . Dead insects lay in empty vases. The floor was sticky. White walls had turned an uneven grey” (TGST 88).

The house is also noted for the absence of any bond between the house and its members. Sophie Mol experiences the stifling atmosphere of the house and considers herself “A captured spy in enemy territory” (TGST 238) and longs to escape from such a suffocating situation. Margaret Kochamma, Sophie Mol’s mother and Chacko’s ex-wife, also has a similar experience. She comes to Ayemenem “to heal her wounded world” (TGST 263) after the death of her husband Joe. Instead, she loses her child and experiences “the fear and gloom that hung over the Ayemenem House” (TGST 263).
The men in the Ayemenem family pride in their ancestry. They are the privileged descendants of Rev. E. John Iype, a priest of the Mar Thoma Church and well-known in the Christian community for being “blessed personally by the patriarch of Antioch, the sovereign head of the Syrian Catholic Church - an episode which had become part of Ayemenem’s folklore” (TGST 22). But as events progress what one finds is the gradual decline of religious and moral values on the one side and the rise of patriarchal and androcentric values on the other, leading to disharmony and discord among its members. According to Nirmala C. Prakash, “The family which was exemplary in theological matters, fails to set an example worth emulating as far as human relationship is concerned” (79).

Against this backdrop, Roy describes four marriages which are noted for their basic incompatibilities. The marriages between Mammachi and Pappachi, Ammu and Baba, Chacko and Margaret Kochamma and Rahel and Larry Mc Caslin are noted for their lack of love, friendship and understanding.

A detailed study of the members of the house reveals the horrifying aspects of their character traits which are quite detrimental in building up personal relationships. They are victims of hypocrisy, vanity, male chauvinism, sexual jealousy, cruelty, perversion, callousness and indifference. Here, human relationship, like the house itself, is on the verge of disintegration and no one in the family is genuinely concerned about the feelings and sentiments of others.

It is with the late Rev E. John Ipe (Punyan Kunju or The Little Blessed One), the oldest member of the family, that the original saga of the house begins in the novel. The description of the portraits of Rev. E. John Ipe and his wife Aleyooty Ammachi, great grandparents of Estha and Rahel, hung on the wall of the Ayemenem house, suggests the marital disharmony and discord between the two. Rev. Iype’s look focuses
on the road. Aleyooty Ammachi looks in the same direction but with hesitation. She “looked more hesitant. As though she would have liked to turn around but couldn’t.” With her eyes, she looked in the direction that her husband looked. With her heart she looked away” (TGST 30). It is also clear from their photograph that it is not easy for her to abandon the river. The external appearance and behaviour of Aleyooty Ammachi gave the impression that she subscribed to powerful patriarchal ideologies but in her heart of heart she secretly wished for a change in her life which can come about only with a change in men’s attitude.

The river, with its quick waters rolling towards the sea, is a symbol of fast social changes taking place in the society and Aleyooty Ammachi cannot be blind to such a reality. Thus, the desire of the women members of the family to have some changes in the family and society is clear from the statement: “Though you couldn’t see the river from the house any more, like a seashell always has a sea-sense, the Ayemenem house still had a river-sense. A rushing, rolling, fishswimming sense” (TGST 30). It was this sense that made almost all members of the family break the rules by crossing the forbidden territory. They are all responsible for tampering with the social codes as to who should be loved and the type of relationship that could be forged. So change is quite visible in the Ayemenem sky. “It was a time when the unthinkable became thinkable and the impossible really happened” (TGST 31). This subtle portrayal of the great grandparents reveals that disagreements and disunity ruled the roost in the Ayemenem family.

Similarly Baby Kochamma (Navomi Iype), daughter of Rev. Ipe and Aleyooty Ammachi, suffers her fate in a patriarchal society in silence. Defying her father’s wishes, she goes to Madras to become a Roman Catholic nun only to get close enough to enjoy the company of Fr. Mulligan. Having failed in her attempt to woo the
Irish priest, which made her restless and unhappy, she was forced to return home. The shrewd, pragmatist Syrian Christian father decided that, “since she couldn’t have a husband, there was no harm in her having an education. So he made arrangements for her to attend a course of study at the University of Rochester in America” (TGST 26). Like many parents, Rev. Ipe also considered education as something unnecessary for a girl child. He would not have parted with his resources if she had behaved according to patriarchal norms and standards.

The relationship between Bennan Ipe (Pappachi), son of Rev. E. John Ipe, and his wife Sosamma (Mammachi) is dealt with in detail in the novel. Marriage gives nightmarish experiences to Mammachi. She is forced to lead a miserable life and Pappachi imposes his superiority on her by beating her savagely and smashing things that come in his way. Roy presents a horrible picture of husband-wife relationship in a traditional family where the man mercilessly beats his wife and daughter. For the male chauvinist and wife beater, Pappachi, life becomes dull and boring with his retirement. Domestic violence begins with Pappachi’s disappointment in his professional life. “His life’s greatest setback was not having had the moth that he had discovered named after him” (TGST 49). He mixes the professional with the personal and the familial.

Pappachi considers it ignominious to help his wife in her pickle business “because he did not consider pickle-making a suitable job for a high ranking ex-Government official” (TGST 47). The ignominy of retirement, the failure to get the credit for the moth that he had discovered, his jealousy over Mammachi’s enterprising skills and popularity, the feeling that he is too old to attract the attention of his wife, combined with his patriarchal attitudes and bias, make the life of his wife and daughter hellish. He cannot imagine his wife outshining him. To him women are second class
citizens whose only purpose in life is to serve their men. “To some small degree he did succeed in further corroding Ayemenem’s view of working wives” (TGST 48).

He was also a victim of jealousy and was annoyed with the attention his wife got. Pappachi was seventeen years older than his wife and this disturbed him constantly. He “realized with a shock that he was an old man when his wife was still in her prime” (TGST 47). His frustration turns into jealousy towards his talented and enterprising wife for her efficient management of the pickle business. This gloomy man watched Mammachi “supervise the buying, the weighing, the salting and drying, of limes and tender mangoes” (TGST 47).

Pappachi could not shed his patriarchal values despite his long official stay in Delhi and a brief period abroad. His appearance in the photograph reveals his attitude to his wife and his hidden personality. “His light brown eyes were polite, yet maleficent, as though he was making an effort to be civil to the photographer while plotting to murder his wife . . . He had an elongated dimple on his chin which only served to underline the threat of a lurking manic violence. A sort of contained cruelty” (TGST 51). This cruelty is evident when he broke the bow of Mammachi’s violin before throwing it into the river. He never touched or spoke to his wife after this incident till his death.

His wife Mammachi, though a victim of his sadism, even cries at his funeral. As Ammu, her daughter puts it, she cried not because she loved him, but she had got used to him. According to Ammu, “human beings were creatures of habit, and it was amazing the kind of things they could get used to” (TGST 5)). Asha Choubey in her article, “A House Without Space: Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things as a Mirror of Patriarchy” writes, “habit is tradition, habit is the long entrenched patriarchal values, which tend to polarize the masculine and the feminine values, where masculine
is the centre and feminine is the periphery. It is this habit that stops Mammachi from feeling happy at the good riddance that Pappachi’s death should mean” (111).

Mammachi’s life shows how even in an educated Indian household deeply ingrained patriarchal beliefs and practices still persist and make a woman’s life miserable.

Pappachi has a split personality. His outward behaviour is quite different from what he actually is. He donates money to orphanages and leprosy clinics and works hard to impress upon people that he is a generous and morally upright. “But alone with his wife and children he turned into a monstrous, suspicious bully, with a streak of vicious cunning. They were beaten, humiliated and then made to suffer the envy of friends and relations for having such a wonderful husband and father” (TGST 180). He even sent his daughter and wife out of their home after beating them.

Pappachi follows the footsteps of his father, Rev. Ipe, in his discrimination of women. His sends his son Chacko to Oxford to become a Rhodes Scholar and he “was permitted excesses and eccentricities nobody else was” (TGST 38) whereas his daughter Ammu becomes a victim of his cruelty and is denied college education and concomitantly better prospects in life.

Many women of the 1960s could not fulfil their educational dreams even though great changes were seen in this sector after the formation of the State of Kerala in 1956. In tune with the attitude of many parents of the times, Pappachi too did not allow Ammu to have college education because it was considered an unnecessary expense. She was forced to help her mother with house work just like any other Indian girl. Even though Pappachi was a retired government official, he did not have enough money to raise a decent dowry and naturally Ammu did not get any good marriage proposal. Her father failed to notice the growth of Ammu from adolescence to womanhood. Her eighteenth birthday passed without being noticed by her parents.
This drives her into desperation and she dreams of “escaping from Ayemenem and the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter, long-suffering mother” (TGST 39).

Mammachi too, consciously or unconsciously, internalizes patriarchal values. Though both Ammu and Chacko have chosen their spouses without the consent of their parents, Chacko’s return, after his divorce, is welcomed and Mammachi even makes structural changes to the house to accommodate his “man’s needs” (TGST 168). But when Ammu returns to her ancestral home under similar condition, she becomes a liability and Mammachi is unmindful of her ‘woman’s needs’.

The caste consciousness of the Malayalee society, especially that of the Syrian Christian community, is clearly portrayed by Roy. This attitude of the Ayemenem family starts thousands of years ago. “Long before the Marxists came. Before the British took Malabar, before the Dutch Ascendency, before Vasco da Gama arrived, before Zamorin’s conquest of Calicut . . . That it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much” (TGST 33). This shows the deep rooted gender and caste bias which seriously hindered the progress of the individual and the society even in the mid-twentieth century. As events in the novel later show such practices have serious repercussions on the lives of women and the dalits.

The history of Kerala is the history of many faiths and ideologies. Certain taboos and conventions practised by the people have divided people. It was a State where untouchability was practiced in its most rigorous form. The Brahmins would even stay away from the shadow of an untouchable for fear of being defiled. The untouchables “were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched” (TGST 73). The Pelaya, Pulaya and Paravan (Parayan) were the worst affected by casteism. Pulayas and Parayans had to stand sixty-four feet away from the Brahmins.
In Kerala, the Brahmins decided the fate of the people. P.K. Gopalakrishnan in his *A Cultural Study of Kerala* wrote, “The kings had only a titular role under the Brahmins and they were even controlled by them. The kings had no authority and legal control over the Brahmins. Even the kings were fined by the Brahmins on many occasions” (292. translation mine). The untouchables were “expected to crawl backwards with a broom sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidently stepping into a Paravan’s footprint” (TGST 73-74).

But with the arrival of Christianity and through the spread of education slight changes were visible in the society. The Syrian Christians feared that their contacts with the untouchables might pose a threat to their prosperous business with the Brahmins. In strict conformity with this practice, Pappachi never allowed Paravans to enter his house. By the time Mammachi came to Ayemenem House, the harsh rules regarding untouchability were gone. Mammachi, being a shadow of Pappachi, shares this value system. Thus the people of the first phase were highly puritan in their attitudes and conservative in their practices. People strictly followed the caste and class endogamy to maintain the purity of the community or tribe.

The Ayemenem family is steeped in patriarchal values and gender stereotypes. Education was considered unnecessary for a woman as her duty lay in looking after her husband and children. Marriage was considered a sacred vocation and a hallowed institution, as is evident from the denial of marital alliance to Baby Kochamma who becomes unfit to enter into such an alliance because of her relationship with Fr. Mulligan. But such behaviour on the part of a modern woman would be seen as a minor lapse peculiar to her age and not in any way warranting the denial of conjugal relationship. Her failure to get close to Fr. Mulligan forces Baby Kochamma to remain
a spinster. It also proves that marriage is far more important for a woman than her education as is evident from the fact that her father sent her for higher education only when she made herself unfit for such a relationship. Likewise, Aleyooty Ammachi, the representative woman of the older generation in the novel, complies with the system even though deep within she does not completely accept it.

The women of the first phase like Mammachi and Baby Kochamma were victims of patriarchal prejudices. They had subconsciously imbibed powerful patriarchal ideologies and became complicit in promoting such a value system. Women were denied economic independence and any slight assertion on their part, as in the case of Mammachi, was opposed fiercely. They suffered everything in silence including physical cruelty. But the same women sanctioned a lot of privileges to men especially to their sons, disregarding the basic needs of a woman. Mammachi, despite her husband’s violence, is a submissive wife. She fits into the traditional role of a wife and mother even though she is exposed to all the evils of a patriarchal family arrangement.

Ammu, the representative of the second generation of women, is the worst sufferer in the novel. She got married to escape her imprisonment at Ayemenem, only to realise that she had made a mistake. Her husband, Baba, was an alcoholic who beat her every day. She suffered everything and thought “that anything anyone at all would be better than returning to Ayemenem” (TGST 39). At twenty seven Ammu’s life had already been lived. Beauvoir remarks: “There is a unanimous agreement that getting a husband – or in some cases a ‘protector’ is for her the most important of understanding . . . she will free herself from the parental home, from her mother’s hold, she will open up her future not by active conquest but by delivering herself up, passive and docile, into the hands of new master” (The Second Sex 352). But when her husband forces her
to satisfy the sexual desire of Mr. Hollick, his boss, in order to protect his job, she hits him with a heavy book. But when his violence began to include their children, she decided to leave the ‘wrong man’ whom she married.

Baba’s patriarchal ideology forces him to consider his wife a sexual commodity which could be bought and sold to promote his selfish interests. But unlike her mother, Ammu refuses to be a silent sufferer. Her frustrated dreams and the discrimination and hypocrisy of the patriarchal society, forced her into a rebel. These give her an “Unsafe Edge” (TGST 44) and released something “restless and untamed” (TGST 44) in her. She flouts all conventions which forced her to live up to the role of a mother or a divorcee. This made her to “temporarily set aside the morality of motherhood and divorceehood” (TGST 44).

Ammu’s frustration and struggle in life is the outward manifestation of an inner battle. Although the family dislikes her unfeminine behaviour and absolute lack of respect for social codes, nobody suspects that this unpredictable woman is, in fact, “a bomb waiting to go off” (TGST 119) and destroy patriarchal power structures and pose a threat to its long cherished social systems and practices.

Ammu’s return to the Ayemenem house, as a divorcee, is not happily accepted. She has “no locus standi” (TGST 57) and her children, Estha and Rahel, are unwelcome. In a patriarchal family like the Syrian Christian family, the son and his children are a privileged category whereas a daughter’s children are often considered outcasts. To Baby Kochamma, the children are “sly . . . uncouth. Deceitful” (TGST 149). Thus the arrival of Sophie Mol at Ayemenem shakes the otherwise insecure foundation of the children and makes them desperate. Stigmatised as “doomed fatherless waifs” (TGST 45), as a result of their father’s rejection, they are subjected to all kinds of taunts and ignominy by every member of the family. In contrast, Chacko’s
child, Sophie Mol is welcomed warmly and ceremoniously. Ammu and her children are treated like second-class citizens in her mother’s house because Ammu is not only divorced but a divorced daughter from an inter-community love marriage. According to Asha Choubey:

In the patriarchal discourse space for women did not exist because it believed that women lacked substance. Men had substance; it was their existence which was important; hence men had all the space they required. Men are absolute; hence they command space while women are the other and do not need a space . . . It was only natural that women will have to struggle a lot to find a space in the scheme of things. Existence had to precede essence but the female existence was/is taken as inessential, hence non-existent. (107-108)

Ammu suffers when she returns to her parental house where her brother, estranged by his wife, dominates the household just because of the fact that he happens to be a male. Poor Ammu helps him in his pickle business which he always refers to as “my factory, my pineapples, my pickles. Legally, this was the case because Ammu as a daughter had no claim to the property” (TGST 57). He firmly held the belief that a woman has no space in her natal home. He is a ‘male chauvinist pig’ (TGST 83) and firmly held the view that “What’s yours is mine and what’s mine is also mine” (TGST 57) and thus holds ownership of all the property left by Pappachi.

Roy attacks the double standard that one sex is intelligent, talented and should be placed at the centre of the scheme of things while the other, considered unintelligent and unskilled, should be placed at the margin. In the Indian context, a woman looks at her brother as her moral and financial support in the absence of her husband and father.
But Chacko sends his sister out of the house. “His bigness. His bullying power” (TGST 226) threatens to destroy her very existence.

Like Anita Nair, Roy also mocks at the conferred superiority of the male in our society. According to Mammachi, Chacko was brilliant and was “made of prime ministerial material” (TGST 56). Ammu scoffs at this and according to her “if a person couldn’t even run a pickle factory profitably, how was that person going to run a whole country” (TGST56). She realizes that “all Indian mothers are obsessed with their sons and are therefore poor judges of their abilities” (TGST 56). Thus her mother is a victim of ‘son-fixation’.

Ammu’s miserable predicament before and during marriage is the result of her father’s spiteful prejudice and her mother’s complicity in it. Her vulnerability is exploited by Chacko, denying her moral space and financial independence. Mammachi’s narrow mindedness and prejudice prevent her from understanding the physical and psychological needs of her daughter. Ammu too inherits this false character trait and fails to understand her children fully. She sees Rahel and Estha as two separate individuals when in reality they share “a single Siamese Soul” (TGST 41).

Ammu is not like her traditional counterparts who are obedient, submissive and conservative living up to the expectations and demands of a patriarchal society. She goes to the History House near Meenachal river to have a physical union with Velutha posing a direct challenge to the moral code put forward by the patriarchal society. Ammu’s genuine love relationship with Velutha was considered illicit, unnatural, shocking, and immoral to them.

Ammu’s transgression of “the Love Laws” (TGST 33) leads to the denial of her freedom and she is locked up in her bed room. The narrator remarks about her confinement: “Ammu was incoherent with rage and disbelief at what was happening to
her at being locked away like the family lunatic in a medieval household” (TGST 252). Later, Baby Kochamma tells Inspector Thomas Mathew that Ammu is frantic and hysterical. So any demand which questions and upsets patriarchal norms and conventional taboos on the part of a woman leads to her being branded as a lunatic. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar highlight this deviant behaviour of the patriarchal society in their work *The Mad Woman in the Attic*.

When Velutha dies in the police lock-up, Ammu, contrary to the calculations of Baby Kochamma, explodes like a suicide bomber. Chacko asks her to get out of the house. She is forced to return Estha to his father and Rahel is sent to a boarding school in Delhi. Ammu has to leave her natal home and drifts from place to place, from job to job, hoping that she would be able to keep her children with her one day. But her hope remained a faraway dream. Suffering from acute asthma, and leading a solitary, desolate, broken life, she dies alone in a dingy room in a cheap lodge with nobody by her side.

The Church, which is a symbol of patriarchal authority, refused to bury Ammu. So Chacko takes the body to the electric crematorium where only “beggars, derelicts and the police-custody dead were cremated . . .” (TGST 162). Nobody from the Ayemenem family except Rahel attended her cremation.

The Syrian Christian families have a fascination for the Western culture. After being exposed to the Western world and its culture, they gradually get uprooted from their native culture. And when they come back to Ayemenem they do not quite fit into its culture. Though an incurable Anglophile, Chacko is aware of the negative aspects of Westernization which rob one of his/her historical or traditional moorings. According to him, “They were a family of Anglophiles. Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their foot
prints had been swept away” (TGST 52). He realizes painfully, though late, that the values of Ayemenem are at odds with the values of the West.

Chacko’s patriarchal attitudes make him look at women as commodities. He has no hesitation in exploiting the women at his workplace. After being divorced by his foreign wife, Chacko flirted with the women in his factory to satisfy his physical needs. But this immoral behavior is not criticised but gets the open approval of the so-called custodians of family values and morality. Mammachi tacitly approves of these relationships and even parts with money to keep them happy. Chhote Lal Khatri writes, “It is in fact the Indian male sensibility of a patriarchal family in Chacko that makes their life difficult to continue” (291).

The generation of women represented by Ammu and Margaret are the most unfortunate ones in the novel. They are liberal in their outlook, marry on their own and when marriages fail, opt out of wedlock. Today divorce is not only receiving acceptance but is being advocated as a way out of a painful relationship. Roy reveals this changing scenario through her presentation of three generations of a Syrian Christian Family. Pappachi and Mammachi, though incompatible in their outlook and attitude, never think of getting separated. In the next generation, Chacko and Ammu are divorcees and in both cases women take the decision. Ammu has valid reasons to justify her decision but Margaret leaves Chacko on flimsy grounds. Rahel is divorced from her husband for no reason at all. And she speaks about her marital status to Mr. Pillai without any embarrassment.

Roy’s attack on male chauvinism does not stop with Chacko. She pictures Comrade Pillai as a typical male who totally disregards the female members of the family and denies them their individual identities. K.N.M. Pillai and Inspector Thomas Mathew are representatives of patriarchy. K.N.M. Pillai, though a Marxist, is a
representative of all political organisations which are highly patriarchal in nature. He is “a professional omeletteer. He walked through the world like a chameleon. Never revealing himself, never appearing not to. Emerging through chaos unscathed” (TGST 14). Ammu shows courage to question the exploitative social and legal system represented by Inspector Thomas Mathew. His sly and greedy eyes fall on the breasts of Ammu and he taps her breasts with his baton as though he were choosing mangoes. It was “calculated to humiliate and terrorize her” (TGST 260). He calls her ‘Veshya’ to subdue her indomitable spirit.

Divorce was not a regular phenomenon in Kerala in the 1960s. A divorced woman was unacceptable or unwelcome in her own family. This familial and social ostracization forced many women from coming out of unwanted and cruel relationships. This is clear from Baby Kochamma’s subscription to the commonly held view of the society that “a married daughter had no position in her parents’ home. As for a divorced daughter-according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all . . . As for a divorced daughter from a *intercommunity love* marriage – Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject” (TGST 45-46). Ammu’s suffering is, to a great extent, the handiwork of her aunt who derives sadistic pleasure out of it.

Ammu’s marriage, her divorce, and the response of her parents to her return mirror the socio-cultural stigma attached to divorcees in India. “Ammu left her husband and returned, unwelcomed to her parents in Ayemenem. To everything that she had fled from only a few years ago. Except that now she had two young children. And no more dreams” (TGST 42). A divorced woman becomes an economic burden especially if she has children. She is often blamed for the marital discord, for it is her
duty to be passive and submissive in order to protect the relationship from crumbling down. Thus divorce is not an option to bail women out of cruel marital relationships.

Baby Kochamma unleashes her pent up feelings and frustrations on Ammu and her children. According to Devika and Meenakshi Raman, “Baby Kochamma still lives in the era she belongs to, because she shows no sign of maturity; only her vicious creativity flourishes . . . The echo of the absence of love in her life makes her barren and she strives to seek satisfaction by sowing the seeds of dissatisfaction in the lives of others . . . She becomes vindictive and falls a victim of double standards” (92-93).

Baby Kochamma, frustrated in life, adds to Ammu’s sense of loss and aimlessness. She sidelines Ammu and her children from the affairs of the family. Perhaps it is her spinsterhood or unfulfilled yearning for love that accounts for her treacherous nature. She did everything possible for a human being to fan the fury of Mammachi and everything went according to her plan. She was instrumental in ousting Ammu and her children from the Ayemenem family and implicates Ammu as the person actually responsible for Sophie Mol’s death.

Roy criticizes the internalization of obnoxious patriarchal norms by the women of the upper class. Ammu loses the battle against tyrannical forces because victims like Mammachi and Baby became her victimizers. Lilian S. Robinson states that in feminist poetics parents are perceived and addressed as a single unit, but the theme of the mother is more frequent and more richly varied in application . . . In a daughter’s conflict with her mother, one may see the mother as an exponent rather than a victim, of the male condition, willingly policing the borders of woman’s role and trying to coerce her daughter into those limits. (277)
Mammachi and Baby Kochamma are responsible for perpetuating a tyrannical system of which they themselves are victims. Mammachi installs a separate door for Chacko to pursue his sexual needs unhindered. But the same Mammachi becomes extremely violent when it comes to her daughter’s affair with Velutha because she “had defiled generations of breeding and brought family to its knees” (TGST 258). So Mammachi and Baby in order to protect the honour of the family decide to do away with Velutha. Indranil Acharya writes:

Seen from a feminist point of view the novel speaks of the violence perpetrated upon woman and paternal tyranny engulfing the luckless children. It ruthlessly un masks the dual standards of morality in society in respect of men and women, the passive submissive role of a wife in a man-woman relationship, and the vindictive attitude of a woman in prolonging the suffering and ignominy of another woman by a male.

(136)

The God of Small Things deals with the detrimental effect of gender and caste on women. Bhagabat Nayak points out that Roy has voiced “the voicelessness of women under the patriarchal authority in a phallocentric society as that worsens her predicament in historical and cultural specificities” (12). The age old tradition and culture based on class and caste prejudices pose serious threats to man-woman relationship. In the novel, caste prejudices eventually lead not only to the victimization of Velutha but also to the destruction of the family. Roy questions love laws formulated by family and society that dictate who should be loved and how much.

The erosion of moral and social values is found not in family relationship alone. The political space, represented by the Communist Party, is ridden with such evils and it too has lost its ideological values. A party which stood in the forefront for social
change, especially in the abolition of untouchability and other evils, has lost its ideology. Its members are concerned only about their personal and financial interests. Roy’s comment that “The flag that fluttered on the roof had grown limp and old. The red had bled away” (TGST 13) illustrates the fact that social changes have eroded the ideological base of the Communist party.

As Ammu grew older, she “learned to live with this cold, calculating cruelty. She developed a lofty sense of injustice and the mulish, reckless streak that develops in Someone Small who has been bullied all their lives by Someone Big” (TGST 181-82). Her revolt against her father is symbolic of women’s revolt against all patriarchal authorities which dehumanize and devalue women and deny them their proper space. But Ammu is determined and she “did exactly nothing to avoid quarrels and confrontations. In fact it could be argued that she sought them out, perhaps even enjoyed them” (TGST 182). Ammu, early in her life, learned to reject the Father Bear Mother Bear stories, given to her. According to her “Father Bear beat mother Bear with brass vases. Mother Bear suffered those beatings with mute resignation” (TGST 180). She denounces all kinds of patriarchal ideology which assert the superiority of men and the inferiority of women. It is mainly through Ammu’s character that Roy voices her genuine concern for women.

The novel centres on the lives of Estha and Rahel and their traumatic experiences which left a permanent scar on their psyche and their unsuccessful attempt to recover from such a painful situation. They are the worst sufferers in the family. The sufferings of women lead to the sufferings of their children as well. The disintegration of Ammu’s marriage has its repercussions and creates a void in the lives of the people of the next generation. Both Estha and Rahel grew up to be abnormal adolescents and Rahel is expelled from school three times for “moral depravity”, for smoking and for
stealing her headmistress’s hair bun. She drifted from school to school and spent eight years in a college without finishing the five-year undergraduate course. Neglect seemed to have resulted in her reckless and irresponsible behaviour. Rahel’s lack of purpose, plans, and her indifference to her future life are clear from her “bizarre, impractical building plans” (TGST 18).

Chacko’s disregard for his sister and children is clear from his behaviour. To the observation made by Ammu that Chacko is least concerned about their well-being, he retorts, “Are they my responsibility?” (TGST 85). Baby Kochamma too airs the same view: “He wasn’t her responsibility” (TGST 21). Estha finds Brutus-like cruelty in Kochu Maria when she says, “This isn’t your house” (TGST 83). So the Ayemenem family could only provide them physical care like food, clothes and fees “but withdrew the concern” (TGST 15).

The relationship between Rahel and Larry Mc Caslin is not dealt with in detail. Rahel’s marriage to Mc Caslin fails due to personal and cultural reasons. The author comments, “He couldn’t be expected to understand that. That the emptiness in one twin was only a version of the quietness in the other. That the two things fitted together like stacked spoons. Like familiar lovers’ bodies” (TGST 20). The incompatibility between Rahel and Larry is the incompatibility between the different value systems practised by two different cultures, one projected as superior and the other inferior. Larry considers Rahel an object and does not want to understand her feelings and the reason for her despair.

Rahel, a witness and victim of family feud, probably believes that much cannot be expected from marriage. So “she drifted into marriage like a passenger drifts towards an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge” (TGST 18). She understands the futility of such a union. Her relationship with her husband is filled with vacuity and
ennui even when they make love. Her efforts to show some kind of involvement in her sexual union with Larry are betrayed by her eyes as Larry feels “offended by her eyes” (TGST 19), for Rahel’s eyes “behaved as though they belong to someone else” (TGST 19). This lack of emotional involvement spoils their relationship. Roy seems to suggest that Rahel, the product of a nation where “various kinds of despair competed for primacy” (TGST 19) inherits this despair. Such an individual cannot have a lasting and harmonious relationship with a man of another culture and temperament.

Childhood experiences cast their ominous shadows even in her adulthood and Rahel has to struggle a lot to come back to normalcy. Roy projects cultural differences and shows how such inconsistencies can bring them unhappiness and bring about the disintegration of their marital life. Indifference and listlessness mark their married life. “Nothing mattered much. Nothing much mattered. And the less it mattered, the less it mattered” (TGST 19). Rahel seems to be an outsider in an alien culture. Sanjay Kumar writes:

> The reader can easily fathom the mutual disjunction and the void which seem to encapsulate the marriage of Rahel and Larry . . . It is not only the different attitude of these two partners in marriage, but also their cultural inconsistencies, which generate mutual listlessness in them . . . Thus theirs is a marriage of nothing, neither of love nor that of two physical humans who seem to burn with lust, and not even that of two like minded intellectuals. (279-80)

After her divorce, Rahel continues working in various offices in America until she is informed of the ‘re-return’ of Estha. She leaves her job and hastily returns to Ayemenem to meet her ‘egg twin’ without any regret over her unhappily ended marriage. She represents the non-traditionalist, non-conservative, liberated women.
Her depression is the result of the physical separation of the twins and is not due to the abrupt ending of her married life. Rahel, being a woman of the twenty-first century, displays exemplary boldness in handling her relationship with men and courageously moves out of a meaningless relationship.

Rahel too shares Ammu’s fate. There was none to arrange a marriage for her and no proposal came as there was nobody to pay her a dowry. “Rahel grew up without a brief. Without anybody to arrange a marriage . . .” (TGST 17). So she ‘drifts’ into marriage without any clarity and purpose. Her marriage fails as she and her husband fail in understanding each other and are indifferent to the fate of their marriage. To Nishat Zaidi, Roy’s novel is “about various hierarchies on which our society is structured -- hierarchies that are repressive and hence invite reaction….” (139)

The third generation, represented by Estha and Rahel, are also victims of the patriarchal society. Rahel, though she inherits the rebellious spirit of her mother, is, to a certain extent, embedded in patriarchal values. She drifts into marriage which is a patriarchal institution. But when she realizes that it is futile to continue a meaningless relationship, she breaks it to assert her individuality and independence.

The novel is steeped in the history of Kerala and is an autobiographical novel. Women writers often use the autobiographical mode to bring out their feminine concerns in a gender biased society. Linda Anderson theorizes upon this aspect of woman’s autobiographical discourse. According to her, “It is necessary to take into account the fact that the woman who attempts to write herself is engaged by the very nature of that activity itself in rewriting the stories, that already exist about her” (42).

Almost all the characters in the novel—Ammu, Chacko, Mammachi, Estha, Rahel and Velutha—are modelled on people from real life. Ammu could be Mary Roy, the mother of Arundhati Roy, and Rahel, the writer herself and Estha her brother, Lalit.
The Ayemenem House mentioned in the novel is not entirely fictional. Roy has modelled her house on Puliyampallil House and Shanti House standing at the end of a path near the Rev. Rao Bahadur John Kuriyan School at Ayemenem junction.

Ammu is, to a great extent, modelled on Mary Roy, Roy’s mother. She married a Hindu tea planter in Assam. Her parents did not approve of her marriage and when she returned to Ayemenem as a divorcee with her two children, Arundhati and Lalit (Rahel and Estha in the novel) they were subjected to cruel treatment. The children were not sent to school and were educated at home. She made history by challenging the Travancore Christian Succession Act, which denied the daughter the rights and privileges enjoyed by the male heirs of the family. This finds its echo in the novel when Chacko declares that “Ammu had no Locusts Stand I” (TGST 57). The favourable ruling given by the Supreme Court of India allowed Christian women an equal share in their paternal property with their male counterparts. Mary Roy’s father, like Pappachi in the novel, was indeed an Imperial Entomologist at the Pusa Institute and later became its Joint Director. Like Pappachi, he also was a victim of sudden bouts of temper and was a bully with his wife and children.

Rahel, in “her jeans and a white T-shirt with wild hair” (TGST 18) is presented like Roy herself. Rahel won admission into a mediocre college of Architecture after she finished her schooling. Roy, too, is an architect by profession and was a student at the Delhi school of Architecture. It was here that she met Gerard De Kunha (Larry Mc Caslin in the novel). She married him and divorced him as Rahel does in the novel.

In a patriarchal society, women’s effort to fashion their identity, individuality and self-will is suppressed with brute physical force and they suffer everything with ‘mute resignation’. The novel narrates the struggles of women and children to find their identity in an inhospitable household. The social events and class relationship in

*A Video, a Fridge and a Bride* (period: 1980s)

*A Video, a Fridge and a Bride* by Nirmala Aravind deals with the financial difficulties and the resultant mental stress experienced by every middle class Syrian Christian family, especially in the early eighties, when their daughter is denied a good marital alliance due to their inability to provide the exhorbitant dowry demanded by either the boy and his family. The situation becomes more frightening if she has a dark complexion and is not beautiful. Elizabeth Cherian, called Lissy in the novel, is twenty one years old and has a BA Degree. Like all parents, Kunnpurath Abraham Cherian, known as Cheriachen, and Kuttiamma are worried about finding a suitable alliance for their daughter. Kuttiamma is more worried about the future prospects of her daughter as she is not very fair, though not too bad to look at. Her father can only offer the dowry that is possible for an ordinary LIC officer. His savings of a life time which after a great deal of addition and subtraction comes up to Rupees One lakh. Even though there is only one girl to be married off, they find it very difficult because prospective grooms demand a huge dowry.

In a Syrian Christian family, the patriarch who is in charge of the division of property divides the property according to the financial needs and background of each member. As Cheriachen’s father and grandfather were employed, they did not receive an equal share of the family property. Thus a son with a salaried income or other sources of income like a good business would be given less than what is given to his
unemployed brothers. A son thus cannot expect an equal share of his ancestral property. In conformity with this practice, Cheriachen’s father and grandfather inherit less than what their brothers inherited. Cheriachen is thus forced to make both ends meet with his meagre salary. His family is a clear reflection of the travails of the salaried middle class Syrian Christians and the painful reality of fulfilling the dowry demands of the suitors.

It is the son who has to shoulder the responsibilities of the family in the absence of his father. Kuttiamma, though not fully supportive of her husband’s behaviour, did not object in the beginning to such kindly acts. But like any woman from a middle class family, she began to object to her husband’s generosity as she found herself in financial constraints with the withdrawal of financial assistance from her brothers after the death of her parents. The thought of her children’s education and Lissy’s marriage made matters worse. Kuttiamma’s insistence and decision to give one lakh as dowry as against Cheriachen’s decision to give seventy five thousand rupees should be seen as a kind of protest against her husband’s generous attitude to his family.

Kuttiamma’s objection can also be seen as the result of gender stereotyping. Girls are taught from their infancy that their primary duty lay with the family like looking after their children, husbands and household affairs. Internalization of this ideology forces them to concentrate on their children and husbands, keeping aside all other concerns. For Kuttiamma, like many other women, family means her husband and children. Naturally a husband’s primary duty is to look after his wife and children. Any dereliction of this primary duty is often questioned by his wife and it leads to conflicts in relationship. Cheriachen’s family would have fared better financially had he been mindful of the concerns of his wife and children only. But his commitments
and obligations do not deter him from extending his services to his relatives including his widowed mother.

Kuttiamma is a committed woman who has internalized the societal and family norms that a woman’s primary duty is towards her husband and children. Her concern for her husband and children often leads to clashes but they do not spill over and spoil their otherwise strong relationship. Her emotional outbursts do not change his attitude. He is adamant and remained unmoved by her protests. Even though Kuttiamma was “an obstinate, self-opinionated wife” (VFB 5) Cheriachen found that life could be made happier if he let her have the last word. So unnecessary squabbles and clashes were averted and the look of quiet amusement on Cheriachen’s face reveals the attitude of a calm person.

There were changes in family arrangement during 1980s. Women began to control family affairs and found a greater voice. The domestic mystique controlled them and like a traditional housewife Kuttiamma’s concerns were centred on her immediate family. She decided to practice economy as she found that her husband was unable to do so. She was a thrifty housewife who never resorted to unnecessary spending. She never sought the help of any servants and the money thus saved would be used to buy a bit of jewellery for her daughter. She, being the empress of her domain, knows how to manage the affairs of her family without any wasteful expenditure. She believes that, as a mother, her primary duty is to avoid unnecessary expenditure to save some money for her daughter’s marriage.

Right from the moment a girl child is born, parents’ anxieties are centred on her marriage. This anxiety is clearly expressed by Kuttiamma when she says, “A father should save every paisa from the day a daughter is born” (VFB 10). The thought about her education is secondary.
Syrian Christians did not follow the joint family system of the Nairs. Kuttiamma’s elder brother, Eapachen, shifts his residence and builds a house very close to the old one. This is the traditional way of shifting residence in a Syrian Christian family and is similar to the joint family system of the Nairs. A traditional Christian family consisted of a large number of children. The gradual change in the family structure can be seen in the Kunnumpurath family which consists of only four children and when it comes to Cheriachen’s family the number dwindles to two, Aby and Lissy—an ideal nuclear family with a boy and a girl.

Christmas and Easter are occasions when almost all members of the family gather in the ancestral house at Pallissery. Like a dutiful daughter-in-law/sister-in-law Kuttiamma takes charge of the kitchen to prepare Christmas breakfast and is assisted by her well-groomed daughter Lissy. They stay back at home while all others go to church to attend Christmas ceremonies. Such occasions are most prized by everyone. Kuttiamma acts in line with the traditional role assigned to the daughter-in-law which bestows upon her the obligation to fulfil the needs and demands of the relatives. The family would consider her ‘the right woman’ for the family only when she discharges her responsibilities as a good host. According to Devika, “Women were assigned active supervisory roles within modern families and female education was treated as an instrument to produce efficient home makers and attractive wives” (10).

A woman looks at her kin as her support and this support system gives her a lot of confidence in times of emotional and financial crisis. Aby’s decision to hurt his uncle with his remarks makes Kuttiamma retort: “People who wanted to say things to Padinjaramannil Eapachan, son of none less than Padinjaramannil Korula Eapen—had better think twice before they said them” (VFB 95). This shows her attachment and respect for her blood relations as well as the social status of her family members.
A girl is a stranger in her own house once she is married. Kuttiamma too undergoes the same experience and becomes a stranger in her natal home with the departure of her parents. According to her, “When a Syrian Christian woman had been given in marriage, her dowry paid, she had no claim of any kind on the home of her childhood and youth. She would return once, for her first confinement and after that no more, except perhaps for an annual visit” (VFB 97). The financial status of her brothers and her dependent status on them prove that she has not inherited any patrimony especially by way of property from her family.

Cheriachen’s movement from Pallissery to Trivandrum indicates the changes in household arrangement in connection with transferable jobs. His mother is worried about people leaving their family property and village ways to embrace the metropolitan culture. This is evident from her response to the woman who was a member of the contingent which came to see Lissy. Her statement that they are planning to shift to Trivandrum next year forces the grandmother to say: “What will the old folk do, if all the young people go and settle down in the city, what will become of our property and our houses?” (VFB 85). The division of the traditional property in Kuttiamma’s family proves that justice is not done to women. Women were strictly brought up with traditional feminine values and daughters-in-law always tried hard to fulfil the expectations of their husbands’ families.

The modern generation’s attitude to marriage has undergone rapid changes. Marriage is seen as a means to further one’s financial prospects. Even though there is only one girl to marry off, even that is very difficult because prospective grooms demand a huge dowry. So Kuttiamma finds fault with her husband for his seemingly lethargic attitude. She complains: “You still think the times haven’t changed, when a son would obediently marry any woman with the right dowry that his parents found
him. Now they want ten times as much dowry, and the girl must look like a film star too” (VFB 4). His wife’s concern highlights the changing attitude of the modern generation towards marriage and woman.

Like all responsible parents, Lissy’s parents too are worried about clinching a suitable alliance for their daughter. Lissy objects to their move as she wants a job to ensure her financial autonomy and self-respect. But her parents are more concerned about a suitable alliance for her than her education and employment. This is evident from their reaction to Lissy when she comes home with her BA mark list. Their lukewarm attitude forces her to ask them whether they are not interested to see her mark list. Even though her father was ready to commend her performance, he gave her “one of his slow smiles” (VFB 5). Her mother had a cursory look at her mark sheet and “murmured appreciation” (VFB 5). These responses clearly show that as far as a girl’s parents are concerned finding a right alliance is more important than her education and independence.

The patriarchal attitude that marriage is a woman’s destiny is quite clear from the attitude of Lissy’s parents who search for a suitable alliance even before she gets a job. Lissy is well aware that an employed woman would be able to get a better alliance and she need not be completely dependent on her husband. Like many modern, liberated women, she too wants to stand on her own feet by getting a job commensurate with her qualification. She was embarrassed by her parents’ decision to look for an alliance without taking her into confidence. Even in matters concerning her life, she does not have any choice. Besides, they are not much concerned about her “burning ambition” (VFB 6) in life, namely, to get a good job. Lissy and her close friend Latha would admire the confident young women working in various offices and they are inspired by these purposeful looking young employed women. Hence like any
educated modern woman, Lissy too makes her stand clear to her parents. “But I have to look for a job! That’s what I need first” (VFB 4). Even though they are not completely averse to her idea, they are at the same time not willing to drop their move to look for proposals. This patriarchal attitude is clear from Kuttiamma’s remark: “That’s for the elders to decide” (VFB 5).

Lissy’s traditional upbringing prompted her not to question her elders. “She had not been brought up to question her elders. Kuttiamma would frown if she so much as spoke or laughed a little too loudly. Her whole life had been ordered by her parents” (VFB 193). The elders considered it their right and duty to take important decisions for her. Probably due to this Lissy has no clear idea about her marriage and the man she wanted to marry. Like many women she too had to accept the man her parents would choose for her.

Lissy was a practical woman. She is aware of the fact that her parents cannot evade their responsibility of arranging her marriage and she too cannot prolong her decision. It was pointless to study any further as she is aware that she has to accept the reality soon. Besides, she has also learnt from her mother that it is the duty of a girl/housewife to keep the house in order and also prove that she is a perfect home maker. Her brother Aby is pursuing his Master’s and is ambitious to become a lecturer and she wants to work in a bank which, according to her, is the best job. She might have been influenced by the countless number of women working in the banking sector. Traditionally, jobs such as teaching, banking and nursing are conceived as jobs most suitable for women.

The change in the social fabric definitely gives Lissy the much needed confidence to act according to her wishes and plans. Later, her job in a bank as a clerk helps her exude confidence. This is clearly visible in her attitude towards the proposals
that come. Although all the proposals fail either because of her lack of beauty or adequate dowry, she, too, is not ready to accept any of the proposals.

The maternal grandmother’s partisan attitude towards her son’s children, just like that of Mammachi and Baby Kochamma in *The God of Small Things*, irritates and pains Aby and Lissy. Their dark skin, thin figure and quiet nature were unlike that of her son’s children who were “robust young things full of animal spirits” (VFB 102). As Lissy grew older, she began to resent this attitude of her grandmother and preferred her paternal grandmother “who was not demonstrative but loved them and was proud of them” (VFB 102). The attitudes of these two grandmothers, especially that of their maternal grandmother, clearly show that a son’s children are important and deserve affection as they are the ones who bring laurels to the family and take on the family name. The daughter and her children belong elsewhere and hence need only a lukewarm reception.

Kuttiamma is more a supporter of patriarchy than a crusader for women’s empowerment. So Lissy appears more at ease in the company of her father than her practical and domineering mother. Her academic achievement is appreciated by her father more than her mother. Kuttiamma is more worried about her daughter’s marriage than about her academic talents or her good job in the bank. In contrast to her nature, Cheriachen is calm and composed and is not in any hurry in dealing with matrimonial alliances. The domineering nature of her mother deprives Lissy of whatever self confidence she has. Her strong influence hinders her growth as an individual and acts as a stumbling block in taking a strong stand on issues that affect her life. But her life in the working women’s hostel in Thiruvananthapuram, a place free from patriarchal prejudices and rules, enables her to take important decisions in her life.
Gender roles have not changed much in our society and are hard to change as well. A woman endears herself to others by performing her traditional roles and Lissy too is expected to do that. So she knows that her expertise in cooking and tailoring would enable her to become a good daughter/wife. In fact, her mother is proud to announce to almost all prospective grooms that her daughter has attended the cookery course and has learnt tailoring as well. It gives immense pleasure for a mother to say that her daughter had done most of the cooking as if a good cook makes a good wife. By doing so, she too feels that she has performed the gender roles expected of a mother.

The visit by the groom’s relatives is an occasion to verify the bride’s ability to perform her gender roles. Usually it is the groom’s mother and his sisters who verify the credentials of a woman especially in matters pertaining to her talents in household duties. This is evident from Kuttiamma’s statement to Lissy: “When your grandmother and aunts came to see me they inspected every nook and corner of the house, Why, I’m sure that eldest aunt of yours even counted the pickle jars in the store room. By the time they left, none of us had any energy left - we had been answering a hundred questions” (VFB 17). Lissy is often reminded of the primary duty of a girl and Kuttiamma has never strayed from this primary role of a mother. Thus all efforts are being made to identify a woman who is good at domestic chores.

All the boys who propose to Lissy are victims of patriarchal ideologies. In a patriarchal family set up, it is the father who takes all decisions, especially financial, because often he is the only earning member in the family. The very first proposal was from a boy who was an intern in Christian Medical College, Vellore. Cheriachen gets angry when he comes to know that his wife has already discussed the dowry to be given. He tells her that she should have consulted him before telling her the exact amount to be given as dowry. Kuttiamma justifies her stand and declares that one lakh
is not too much for a doctor and accuses him, “A father should save every paisa from the day a daughter is born” (VFB 10). But this proposal was dropped by the boy’s family as he was already engaged. This attitude of the boy proves that he did not take into consideration the feelings of the girl who was rejected and this is in tune with the patriarchal attitude of treating a woman as an object.

Marriage today has become an easy means to enrich one’s coffer and further his influence. Here too the stumbling block is money. The failure of the very first proposal sent shockwaves and Cheriachen could not sleep at all. He fears that if a boy demands five lakhs that year then what would be the amount one would demand the following year and this thought troubles him. But Lissy is least worried even though the proposal has been turned down. According to her, she never demanded a doctor for her and for that matter she never wanted to get married at all. The Indian Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 could not eradicate the evil practice of dowry. Lissy painfully remarks, “If my father could pay five lakh rupees they could find someone to marry me even if I were lame or a half wit” (VFB 234).

The second proposal is from an engineer in the Space Research Organisation and it highlights another patriarchal attitude of her parents and society. Her parents “did not ask for her opinion and she did not expect to be asked” (24). Even at the age of twenty one a woman is not asked about her opinion and decision on issues which directly affect her life. To Lissy’s statement that Suma is a feminist, her mother says, “I don’t know much about ‘isms’ and ‘ists’, but in my personal opinion women shouldn’t have opinions. There’s no need for them, to add to the confusion” (VFB 47).

Cheriachen does not even consider it necessary to give the boy and the girl a chance to talk in private. The only question the boy asks is about her culinary talents and this highlights his patriarchal attitude and gender expectations. Lissy expresses her
dislike because he only wanted to know about her cooking. Kuttiamma declares that this is a good proposal for Lissy. But much to the chagrin of Lissy’s parents, they come to know that the proposal has not found favour with the boy’s family as they found that the girl was not pretty enough and Lissy was shocked and hurt to hear that she was not pretty enough to be considered a prospective bride. She comments: “Do you know what it feels like to have strange men and women come to look at you as if you were a cow up for sale, and bear with all their prying questions, only to be told you’re not good enough for them? . . . I know I’m not attractive . . . I want to be liked for what I am, just like anyone else” (VFB 233).

The third proposal is brought by Cheriachan’s cousin, Joy, and the boy is a chartered accountant in a good firm in Baroda but he is thirty two years old. The boy’s family is not very particular about dowry. They are looking for a good girl who can run a house well. Lissy imagines that since the boy is thirty two and his brother has married outside his community, good proposals will not come in their way if they demand a huge dowry. Here too the boy identifies a woman with her familial responsibilities.

In the traditional Christian community, the bride and the groom do not have much choice with regard to their partners in life. But men who went outside the state for work often came home with women of their choice. This led to clashes between the boys and their parents. Often, girls were forced to abide by the decisions of their parents as many of them lived with their parents performing familial duties. Even the cases of those women who were lucky enough to find some government jobs either in schools or banks were not entirely different. Parents were reluctant to send their daughters for jobs outside the state or outside the country for fear of being ‘corrupted’ by strange ideas. But great changes took place in the social life of Kerala in the
eighties and many women began to look for jobs either outside Kerala or in the Western countries, especially in the nursing sector. This infused in them a lot of confidence and provided them with economic stability.

When the enormous responsibility of finding a suitable alliance fails, Lissy’s parents are even ready to think of a match which will definitely be a mismatch for Lissy in view of the age difference between the two. They fail to realise that this can lead to many adjustment problems in marital life. But Kuttiamma’s argument that thirty two is not very old and the case can be settled if all other aspects are satisfactory is in strict accordance with patriarchal values. She firmly believes that parents’ primary duty is to somehow find an alliance for their daughter and so Lissy’s feeble protests were ignored by her. But later they came to know that the family’s antecedents were dubious.

Suma, her close friend, tells her that girls should not get married before they are at least twenty five. She tells Lissy:

Between twenty and twenty-five is when a man finishes whatever course he’s doing and looks for a job. Those are the years when he begins his career, and he has to devote all his time to it. And meanwhile what happens to the women? No matter how brilliant they may be their parents have only one ambition to ‘dispose’ of them, as they say. And then, what happens . . . They start breeding before their careers can take off. They can only start being serious about their jobs when the kids grow up. Which means a good ten years has been lost, and they are just at the bottom of the ladder when the men who started out with them have already established their reputation. (VFB 41)
The haste with which modern marriages are arranged without taking into consideration the personal compatibility and family background of the partners can result in unexpected hardships for women. The anxiety of modern women is portrayed by Suma when she tells Lissy’s mother to be very cautious as a lot of dowry-related deaths are reported from everywhere. According to her if one goes in for a hasty marriage, one will have to make a lot of compromises.

The next proposal is from a boy who works in an international company in Muscat. To Joshua, the marriage broker, “the vital point” (VFB 63) to be discussed in any marriage proposal is “the rate” (VFB 63)—the amount which a woman’s father would be able to provide for the groom. This time also nobody spoke to Lissy about the new proposal and it did not seem necessary at all to take Lissy into confidence.

An experienced broker like Joshua knows the practical difficulties experienced by the bride’s parents in getting a suitable proposal. According to him, girls are married off even before the age of twenty one. The case of girls who are educated is a bit complicated. The parents of such girls will have to provide a huge sum as dowry. And in the case of girls with higher educational qualifications, it is well-nigh impossible to get a suitable match. The boys may not be equally qualified and even if they are, parents have to offer them an exorbitant amount in addition to the amount spent for the girl’s education. Due to these problems many families either do not send their daughters for higher studies or are content to provide them with semi-technical education like paramedical courses or nursing. But this situation is gradually changing.

The news of further proposals and the autocratic manner of her parents make her angry and what she actually wishes for is a two week rest with her paternal grandmother during Christmas. She protests to her mother. “You never think about me or care for my feelings. Do you have any idea how humiliating it is to be gaped at and
sized up and then dismissed” (VFB 67). Lissy refuses to be “seen by this creature” (VFB 68) and staged an immediate walk out. The feeling that her parents will not help her to fulfil one of her long-cherished dreams in her life and her fear that she would be pushed to marry someone she disliked force her to convey her fears to her aunt Rajamma.

The fourth proposal is from a boy from Cheranad who worked as a chemist in a petrochemical firm in Muscat. His parents wanted a well-behaved, quiet girl from a good family as it was the duty of the youngest son to look after the parents. The boy, in addition to the one lakh as dowry, wanted one more lakh to start a business of his own in the Gulf. He, too, like other grooms is not free from patriarchal values and values money more than relationships.

The next proposal, the fifth one, is brought by Sosakutty, Cheriachen’s sister in Vaikom. The boy is an engineer in Keltron, the State Electronics Corporation. Since the boy is a Jacobite her mother is against the proposal. But Lissy, a modern, educated woman, does not mind such minor issues. But the boy’s people were disappointed with Lissy’s features as they looked for someone who was very fair and good looking. But they are ready to proceed with the proposal if Cheriachen is ready to pay one lakh as dowry and provide fifty sovereigns worth of gold ornaments. Lissy realises that this is the price her family has to pay for her dark skin. If the boy is forced to marry her at the behest of his relatives, she fears whether they would be able to lead a happy life. He might even demand some consolation prizes like a car or a house. They even thought that the house in which they live was their own house which might go to Lissy in future. She even tells them to buy a piece of land in Trivandrum for Lissy. The sharp rise in the dowry amount and the demand for other benefits annoy Cheriachen and he is disappointed. Kuttiamma was furious with Cheriachen for dropping the proposal and
warns him that grooms would demand very soon double the amount they offer at present.

The next proposal, the sixth one, is brought by Samuel, a clerk in Cheriachen’s office who is a distant relative of Cheriachen’s brother-in-law Thampan. The boy who is immensely rich is a member of the local Lion’s club and the parish committee, and feels the need for a wife as marriage lends social respectability. Marriage for some is a means to gain social acceptability, to promote their selfish interests and not for developing true relationships. According to Beauvoir, “Man marries today to get anchorage in immanence” (496).

The seventh proposal is from a boy who is a clerk in a nationalised bank and he is looking for a girl with a good job. While answering his questions, Lissy asked him how long he had been working. But this question startled him as he did not expect any question from a woman he was seeing for the first time in his life and it was considered bad of a woman to ask a man questions. It had been a most unnerving experience for him. Lissy was displeased with the “cowardly, effeminate creature who had no spirit or spunk and no mind of his own” (VFB 192) and expressed her unwillingness to marry such a man.

The eighth proposal is from a pastor named Rev. Zachariah. His parents hail from Tiruvalla but have settled down in Madras. They too want a pious, quiet and a well mannered girl suitable to perform the role of a good home-maker. But all of them are deceived when they find that the man had an American girlfriend accompanying him. This is highly suggestive of the changes that take place in Kerala, especially in Syrian Christian families, in the modern era. The educated people, who are settled in foreign countries, often enter into relationships with women of that country defying the wishes of their parents. This attitude of the boy manifests the vast changes that have
taken place in the institution of marriage with those employed outside the state accepting a value system quite different from that of the traditional conservative society. Parents are unable to monitor their behaviour and this is evident from the attitude of Mr. Zacharia. The ninth proposal came from a man who was an officer in a firm in Coimbatore. He came to see Lissy just to please or oblige his parents. He admits that he has plenty of time to get married as he is only twenty six. The man did not demand any dowry and was pleased with her looks but expressed his regret for his action.

Another proposal, though strictly not a proposal, is from one of her colleagues, Jose, who is a converted Christian. Even with all his religious and social ostracism, Lissy finds herself drawn to him because “he cared for her” (VFB 228). The serious opposition from her parents to this alliance forces her to have a civil ceremony to legitimize the marriage. But Jose wants to have the marriage in a church which will enable him to take sweet revenge on the people of his community. To Lissy, marriage is not a means to take revenge on anybody. So she decides against marrying him because she realises that true love plays no part in this relationship and that his “love is only a mask, a dignified expression to hide the dark current of desire, to possess, to oppress, to have and to hold in thrall” (VFB 263).

Women’s sisterhood or fellowship plays quite often a great role in instilling confidence in women. Lissy’s friends, Renji and Suma, try to convince her of her folly in entering into a relationship with a man who went about with a permanent chip on his shoulder. Her newly found job as a probationary officer instills in her the much-desired confidence and self-esteem to take her own decisions for her future.

The novel comments on the role played by religious conversion, communism and the migration to the Gulf in counteracting casteism in Kerala. How deep-rooted
caste feelings are in a Syrian Christian community and how its violation brings disharmony and discord among the family members are clear from the argument between Lissy and her family members. To her argument that Jose is a Christian, Annamma retorts, “The audacity of the girl! Christian, Indeed!” Later they declare: “The fellow’s a Pulaya, and he is not like any of us. Does a Pulaya have a soul to be saved?” (VFB 248).

Even communism which was touted as the panacea for all social evils failed dismally when it came to the execution of its ideals. Aravind asserts: “That’s what these chaps who spout Marxism are all like beneath the bluster . . . They’re just mixed up. I’m talking about the white collar Marxists. It’s a pose, nothing more, like our government’s socialism” (VFB 258).

Lissy had been completely under the influence of her domineering mother and followed what had been dictated to her. It is only when she is away from the influence of her mother that she is able to take independent decisions even as insignificant as the colour of her dress or writing the probationary officer’s test to such important ones as deciding to marry Jose. Such independent decisions enable her to present herself as a self-confident person with an identity of her own.

The son is responsible for looking after the family affairs but Aby’s defiant announcement that he would like to join the Bible Institute at Bangarapet after his MA. upsets his parents, especially his mother who sees in “such unworldly ambitions . . . the prospect of them being deserted by him” (VFB 32). Aby stands in complete contrast to his father who is devoted to his family, his mother and to his unmarried sisters. He is a symbol of the modern youth who move around without any clear purpose in life. To Lissy, “he’s becoming like a stranger” (VFB 32). Kuttiamma reminds him of young
men who work hard in the Gulf to pay for the dowries of their sisters and rebukes him for ignoring his sister and parents by his mindless decision.

Lissy’s life in the Maharani Memorial Vanitha Hostel in connection with her bank job enabled her to look at things from an independent woman’s perspective. Her close friend Renjini Ruth Suan Pothen and others find that she is “totally conditioned” (VFB 175). Her fear of her father prevents her from even sending an application form for the probationary officers’ examination of the Reserve Bank of India without his consent. Renjini found that many parents, including Lissy’s, are afraid to encourage their daughters to be ambitious, fearing that it would make them independent. So Renjini, with the help of her friends, plans “the liberation of Liz” (VFB 175) to make her an independent woman.

Renjini criticises Lissy for yielding to the wishes of her parents. According to her, Lissy’s parents should have asked her opinion before giving a suitor the permission to meet her at the hostel. Besides she cannot imagine how Lissy could withstand such an acid test and criticises her for undergoing such an ordeal. Many dowry deaths, according to Renji, occur due to the passivity of women. She is even willing to stay single if she does not find the right person. She is highly critical of weak-willed women who dance according to the tunes of the domineering men.

Renji’s intervention makes Lissy a little bold and courageous. She plans to reconsider her attitude towards marriage and does not want to become a butt of ridicule before “cynical bargain hunters” (VFB 193). Renjini is exactly the opposite of what a traditional woman ought to be. She consciously tries to cast away the so-called feminine qualities which enslave women.

Lissy’s friendship with Renji enables her to think independently. As a first sign of her independence and protest, she decides not to go home for pooja holidays even
though she was invited by her father. Her education, job and sisterhood gave her confidence to take decisions, both trivial and important.

Annamma finds fault with her brother for sending Lissy to work against her advice. Cheriachen’s sister and her husband exhort Cheriachan to bring her to her knees by making her resign her job. Lissy was forced to vacate the hostel and was put under house arrest. Later she was kept in a relative’s house. Even when she was admitted in the hostel, the warden was asked to keep an eye on her. Within the patriarchal system itself, it is often women who perpetuate the evils of the system, acting as agents of oppression. S.Devika, in her article “The Specificities of Milieu in Nirmala Aravind’s A Video, Fridge and a Bride” observes that “caste feelings and patriarchal norms work hand in glove with marital laws to detain the women in their inferior place in the society” (15).

Lissy argues that she would be forced to go to the extreme of avoiding marriage if she is to marry a man who gave importance to money and personal advancement instead of seeing in her a true companion.

The empowered Lissy tells her grandmother that she can look after herself very well as a spinster. Her education and her job have given her immense confidence and she cannot be easily coerced into marriage. The same confidence enables her to tell Jose that he has no right to discuss her personal affairs. The novel, thus, deals with one of the important institutions in a Syrian Christian community, i.e. marriage. The institution of marriage is seen as an easy way of making money. The sacredness attached to this institution is only in its ceremonies and externalities but in practice it treats woman as a commodity to be bargained for. It is this buying and selling of brides and grooms that forms the focus of this novel with the intriguing title which signifies the kind of things that are acceptable to the groom and their order of preference. It is to
be noted that the bride occupies the very last place in the list of articles that make up the title of the novel.

Changes are also visible in the attitude of widows. They do not want to lead a dejected and depressed life and believe that each one should have the right to decide the course of her life. Though Lissy’s mother had a high opinion of Latha, Lissy’s close friend, she did not approve of the way Mrs. Balachandran, a widow, conducted herself. She was a lecturer in a college in Trivandrum and did not see any harm in dressing well. Kuttiamma expresses the attitude of the society towards widows when she says, “widows ought not to be so sprightly” (VFB 22). Lissy, a representative of the modern liberated woman, does not approve of her mother’s view-points. She shares Mrs. Balachandran’s view that there is no sense in mourning for the past and that her children should continue to live in happiness as they had been living when their father was alive.

Lissy, a modern educated woman, is thus forced to assert her independence and individuality by protesting against the patriarchal attitudes of the family and the society. She challenges the commodification of woman and succeeds in achieving financial autonomy and self-respect. The attitude of her parents to look for an alliance without taking into consideration her dreams and future is unacceptable to her.

Lissy’s relationship with Jose proves that she is able to take independent decisions. Her suggestion for a civil ceremony to legitimize the marriage proves this point. This is also suggestive of the changes taking place in the Syrian Christian community where the younger generation is least concerned about tradition and ancestry, and is willing to marry even a member of a community which is traditionally considered lower to its status, thus destabilizing the existing hierarchical position of the community.
Thus Roy and Aravind, through their novels, bring out the patriarchal bias against women and the stifling atmosphere of a gender-based society. Women like Ammu protested but she could not shape her destiny. Lissy is educated and employed and this enables her to chart her future. Her empowerment is not only the result of her determination and hardwork but also the result of her courage to oppose the patriarchal attitudes of the society.

The following chapter discusses the works of Jaishree Misra and Anita Nair to bring out the condition of women of the third phase. A feminist reading of the works of these novelists has been undertaken to highlight the argument that the third phase is period of rigorous patriarchal conditioning. This section also reveals that women take to various modes of resistance to fight against their enslavement and move towards empowerment.