CHAPTER III

WOMAN AT THE CROSSROADS OF LIFE

For the past several centuries Indian woman has been deprived of the opportunities to come up in life. Her economic independence has been crippled by restrictions like early marriage and the purdah system which fetter her from experiencing the fullness of life that is readily accessible to her male counterpart. The recent decades have witnessed a changing role for women. Post- independent India witnesses notable changes in the constitution and declares equal rights and privileges for women in the society.

In the male dominated society, a woman has to pretend that she is gifted with a contented life. She is glorified if she undertakes her role as a mother or a wife and dedicates herself completely for the welfare of others. Kamala Das expresses this in one of her poems,

But
I must pose
I must pretend
I must act the role
Of a happy woman

Happy wife (The Suicide)

But this pretension gives only a kind of disappointment and suffocation in women’s lives. In an interview to Geetha Gangatharan, in Indian Communicator, (quoted by R.S. Pathak in his work The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande), Shashi Deshpande opines:

…I am a feminist in the sense that, I think, we need to have a world, which we should recognize as a place for all of us human beings. There is no superior and inferior, we are two halves of one species. I fully agree with Simone de
Beauvoir that ‘the fact that we are human, is much more important that our being men and women’ I think that is my idea of feminism. (18)

The male dominated society pushes the woman to the margin and she has to find her place and identity by fighting against the established male views of life which are biased distortions. The question of identity never troubled the Indian woman in the manner it does now, because tradition has defined her roles as a daughter, wife and mother, always under the protection and power of a man. The educated Indian woman feels suffocated because the social demands intrude into her individuality and so she finds it difficult to break her relationship away from others. But with the changing scenario, women writers like Shashi Deshpande have become aware of the new Indian woman’s status and standing in society and through their writings they have tried to show the need for a social change.

G.S. Amur points out in the Preface to *The Legacy and Other Stories*,

Woman’s struggle, in the context of contemporary Indian Society, to find her identity as wife, mother and, most important of all, as human being is Shashi Deshpande’s major concern as a creative writer, and this appears in all her important stories. (10)

The success of every girl child is mainly based on her cordial relationship with her family and her duty towards the society. There is always a conflict between the responsibility of a girl and the burgeoning feeling of her self-identity. This course of conflict is the main cause for the bloom or gloom of the full identity of a girl in the society. The successful formation of this identity depends upon the delicate balance that the girl maintains between submissions and revolt. Growth into maturity and selfhood are
frequently tested in the family situations and in the course of confrontations with the adults.

In her novels, Shashi Deshpande portrays different aspects of the life of the middle class Indian women. She ends up the novels with clear-cut estimation that instead of fighting against the patriarchal society, the protagonists have taken a balanced decision to move on without friction. The heroines in The Dark Holds No Terrors and That Long Silence prove the novelist’s real concern for the women who undergo a great turmoil and suffering. Both are career women coming from the middle class who are torn apart between their personal and professional lives. They toil hard to balance themselves between the two. They go through great ordeals but in the end they reframe themselves and emerge as fully developed individuals who can make both personal and professional lives successful. Shashi Deshpande’s novels speak of the final phase of self-discovery, the female phase – focused on female experience and female writing.

Sarita in The Dark Holds No Terrors very boldly confronts reality and realizes that the ‘dark’ no longer holds any terror to her. She is an ordinary, simple and modest middle class woman who is aware of her limitation. She wishes, hopes and longs to break away from the rigid traditional norms. The painful experiences at her parental home lead her to discover her latent strength.

She sees Manu as a knight in shining armour, her amorist who liberates her from her horrid home. She feels completely complacent about her stay with him in a squalid single room apartment without complaining about the corridors filled with stench and dark, sealed in odours. She could carry through without any grievance against the women with inquisitive and unfriendly eyes and the men with lascivious stares. But very soon she comprehends that her delight is only a delusion.

Saru is not an exception to the archetypal Indian woman who has a moulded psyche,
bent on bestowing comfort and consolation upon others at the cost of their interests. After fifteen years of marriage she returns to her parental home to get away temporarily from the torments of her martial life. During her stay at her father’s house, she reminisces and re-evaluates her life and makes her mind up to confront reality with courage. She works for her father and Madhav and feels comfortable in supporting them, absolutely oblivious of her profession. But her earnestness to establish herself casts back her budding career and she sets aside her contentment and sets out to her line of work.

Saru’s self-esteem is low and due to the continuous criticism by her mother she becomes a sadly diminished figure. In her mother’s presence Saru feels that she is being observed, analyzed, weighed up for decisive criticism and possibly for definitive rejection. So, Saru feels an excessive need to prove her worth to the family. But she carries this pressure to prove her worth from her childhood into her adulthood. Her marrying Manu and her claim to have thereby severed the umbilical cord, is an act of defiance proving her strength, power and self-reliance.

Saru’s mother’s humiliating comments while she looks at the mirror are her memorabilia.

You will never be good looking. You are too dark for that

…How many times must I call you? Looking at yourself in the mirror! I’ll give you a certificate to say that you’re beautiful. Will that satisfy you?

(TDHNT 61)

In the Indian society, a traditional mother never openly appreciates the beauty of her daughter. It is quite normal for adolescent girls to be conscious of their costumes and take extra care to show off their outfit. But Saru’s mother deprecates her when she dresses up in front of the mirror. Her mother’s animosity and adverse comments create angst and
acrimony in her. When she attains puberty she bitterly thinks, “If you are a woman . . . I don’t want to be one” (TDHNT 62).

Saru is not able to put up with the fact that her body functions in the same way as her mother’s. She misses the considerate affection and caring compassion from her mother during her adolescence and resents the restrictions and the reprimands she received. As a reprisal she resolves to rebel against her mother. She becomes highly self-willed and develops ill-will towards her mother. After her schooling she revolts against her mother’s restrictions and goes in for higher education. Manu makes an impression on her mind and in her infatuation she marries him. To acquiesce in a marriage arranged by the parents and accept the man proposed as her husband is the time-honoured practice in India. To go along with a man of one’s own choice is anathema to Indian tradition and abominable to the society and the couple will be shunned by their family and their relatives. Since she is not happy with her mother, she marries Manu to bring disgrace to her mother. He satisfies her hunger for love. She feels, “I was insatiable, not for sex, but for love. Each act of sex was a triumphant assertion of our love of my being loved. Of my being wanted” (TDHNT 40).

Once in the nursing home she cuts a paper into pieces and dubs the smithereens strewn around as the bits of her mind. She has worked her way through several trials and tribulations. Despite the fact that she is well off, she lacks composure and contentment. The world of a female is sheathed in impenetrable layers of customs and conventions devoid of choices, independence and individualism. Her agitated mind does not easily settle down to serenity.

Saru never thinks that Manu is not her perfect choice. But she leaves her home, husband and children and patients only to get away from her husband’s brutality during night. Her husband has ample love for her but it gets obscured under his male chauvinism.
His abundant love for her collapses under the weight of his sense of superiority and is overcome by his preformed opinion that a woman should live in subjugation to her husband. The problem in her life is not her husband’s lack of love for her but his plentiful male prejudice. The problem she faces is like a fatal disease and others cannot realize its intensity and she is unable to make them realize it as she feels.

Saru thinks that if she had belonged to the yester years she would have given way to everything in her life. In those days women had no choice and they had to put up with what they had. The nature of human beings will never change but it may be shaped by the age that they live in. She recalls the life of her grandmother who silently bowed to the tortures and bore the suffering meekly as her fate.

Saru has little interest in the traditional way of life and has scant regard for the ill-conceived customs religiously practiced by the wives. The wife of Manu’s friend abjectly accepts the ill-treatment meted out to her by her husband. Even though she is not introduced to others, she behaves humbly in an inconspicuous manner, standing like a low profile waiter at the dining table enduring her effacement in entirety. Vidya, who masqueraded as a free thinking activist released from traditionally imposed constraints, fades into gloominess after her marriage. Saru looks down at Smita for changing her name to Gitanjali because according to Saru it amounts to extermination of her persona. She detests Smita for being quixotic and pretending to be pleased with her way of life. Saru condemns them as “silly martyrs” and “idiotic heroines”. She remembers the Sanskrit story from her school text of “the woman who would not disturb her husband’s sleep even to save her child from the fire. A woman so blessed, it was said that Agni himself came and saved the child” (TDHNT 188).

Saru has tremendous respect for the dignified, self-reliant friend Nalu, who works as
a teacher and despises all compromises and remains single to lead a meaningful life of convictions. When Saru is invited for giving a speech at a women’s college, she prepares for a fervid oration filled with vigorous criticism of female subordination but on the stage, due to her festering discontent with female subjugation she delivers an imaginative extempore speech:

Listen, girls…whatever you do, you won’t be happy, not really, until you get married and have children. That’s what they tell us. And we have to believe them because no one has proved it wrong till now. But if you want to be happily married, there’s one thing you have to remember. Have you girls seen an old fashioned couple walking together? Have you noticed that the wife always walks a few steps behind her husband? That’s important, very important, because it’s symbolic of the truth. (TDHNT 124)

She acknowledges this as the way of the world perhaps leading to domestic bliss in the traditional sense of the term, but she would prefer the road less traveled by. Despite the agony it causes and the difficulties she has to put herself through, she cannot turn back.

The suffering in her marital life starts with success in her profession. She becomes a successful doctor which upsets her family life. Manu gets exasperated of her popularity and busy life. He is unable to articulate his agitation caused by his inferiority complex. In Saru’s case there is a gradual disappearance of love and a slow and steady departure from the attachment towards family which she had once developed. Manu satiates his male ego by sexually torturing Saru at nights. Though Saru needs Manu’s love, she cannot tolerate his brutality in bed.

Saru understands that she is in the clutches of problems and needs to escape from her mental agony. She gets the news of her mother’s death and utilizes it as a chance to
move from Manu. She decides to go to her parents’ house. She visits her father not out of her real concern for him but because of her dire need of liberation from her apprehensiveness about Manu’s peculiar behaviour. She wants to escape from the angst-ridden atmosphere created by Manu. She says:

…Yes, that’s why I’m going. To get away from this house, this paradise of matching curtains and handloom bedspreads. This hell of savagery and submission. But what if I carry my own hell within me? Then there is hope for me at all. But that too I have to know. And therefore I am going home to my father…. (TDHNT 28)

She has her own grudges against her father for he did not support her when she was at home. She is aware of his surrender to his wife for taking decisions. “He never took any interest in my school or college. He left it all to her. And she never really cared. Not after Dhruva’s death I just didn’t exist for her. I died long before I left home” (TDHNT 32).

Though Saru’s father admitted her in the medical college for her higher studies and spent for her education, he never had a fatherly fondness for her. When she comes back to him from Manu, he shows no interest in knowing the cause for her return. He does not even show a surprise for her coming. He does not smile or speak to her or ask her about her personal life. She feels isolated in his presence because he is very formal and enquires only about the travel and train timing and not about her life. She feels, “He hasn’t smiled at me as yet. But when have we ever smiled at each other” (TDHNT 17).

Though Saru has hatred towards her mother, she enquires her father about her mother’s death out of courtesy. She is very formal in enquiring her father. She doubts whether he likes her to stay there or not:

‘When I heard of Ai’s death’, she went on, her voice harder and louder, ‘I
thought I’d like to see you once. But if there’s any problem about my staying here…’

No, no, nothing like that. But I didn’t know … I mean, I never imagined…’

his voice trailed away. (TDHNT 19)

Saru can make out that her father’s indifferent attitude is his faithfulness towards his dead wife and so welcoming her will be a disloyalty to the dead woman. When she comes to know about her mother’s death, she is unable to bear the shock. She wants to prove that she is leading a better life and she has not committed any mistake by disobeying her mother. She wants to tell her father that her mother died without forgiving her. “All defenses down now. The battle for a while given up, won by a frightened girl who stammered…my mother? But I would not give up so easily. I struggled until the frightened girl vanished” (TDHNT 25).

At her parent’s house, Saru has no emotional attachment with the place as well as with her father. Her mind has become emotionally ill-balanced. She wants to pour out the troubles of her life to her father and at the same time she wishes her father to ask about her life. She is in a predicament to accept that she is the root cause for her destiny. She thinks that if her mother had accepted her feelings, she would not have selected Manu for her. If her marriage was an arranged one, she would have got support from her parents at the time of crisis. Her parents would have come to her rescue.

In her confused state she is unable to find the cause for her sufferings. She feels that she has done injustice to her mother as a daughter, to her husband as a wife and to her children as a mother. She realizes that she has failed in all her responsibilities except in her profession. She wants to quit her profession not because of her loss of interest but because of her necessity to escape from the tortures of Manu.
She is fed up with things that she has decided in her life and their consequences and she doubts whether her decisions were just fallacies. She is emotionally imbalanced and looks for somebody to guide her. She had taken decision all these years with courage and conviction but now she feels the need for someone to offer support.

Saru does not tell anything about her parents or brother to her children. Once she mistakenly calls her son Abhi, ‘Dhruva’, her daughter immediately questions her who is Dhruva? She avoids the question and keeps everything within her. When she shows her children’s photographs to her father and Madhav (a boy who resides with her father), and Madhav tells that her daughter resembles her mother, she is repulsed by his words and abhors it though she knows in her heart that her daughter’s character is very much analogous to that of her mother. Her hatred towards her mother is so extreme that she detests any resemblance of her daughter to her mother.

Saru’s defiance towards her mother awakens her career ambitions. She wants to be a self-reliant person and at the same time dreams of a strong conquering counterpart who will support her. She is conscious of her career and longs for recognition and financial satisfaction. She is highly ambitious and does not feel that Manu is an obstacle to her success. She believes that her mother is a symbol of the stultifying tradition. She never forgets to work hard and to get first class. Her mother’s attitude has given rise not only to remorse but also to revolt. The image of a lady doctor seen in her childhood becomes a source of inspiration to her. With her father’s support she gets admission in the medical college. Her success is mixed with the sour taste of hatred for her mother. “There was a pain in my chest, my throat ached intolerably, there was a bugging in my ears, a blur in front of my eyes, I hated her. I wanted to hurt her, wound her, make her suffer” (TDHNT 142).

Flabbergasted, bit by bit, she builds a barrier of hostility which turns into a silence
around her. The shadows of the unhappy relationship with her mother darken her adolescence, her early youth and even her love for Manu. At every success, she hesitates and wants to tell her mother that despite everything she has done to her, she is happy and successful, and to tell her in a mute appeal to withdraw the curse, which constantly resounds in her ears.

There is a spontaneous surge of life in Saru. She wants to escape from the narrow and suffocating domestic life imposed by her mother’s authority. Saru appreciates and respects other women and does not want a life which resembles that of her mother. She craves for a life for herself which is altogether different from her mother and so her determination of getting first class to get admitted in a medical college is very deeply rooted in her desire. Her dreams are realized, but her marriage in the names of social custom, her customary role arising out of it and the expectations of her husband’s traditional male chauvinism totally shatter them. She is completely immersed in her agony of searching her own identity and in trying to explain to herself her own childhood fears and in trying to overcome them to have a fuller life. Saru accepts her loneliness and tries to overcome it by self-determination: “All right, so I’m alone. But so everyone else. Human beings – They’re going to fail you. But because there’s just us because there’s none else we have to go on trying. If we can’t believe in ourselves, we’re sunk” (TDHNT 220).

Saru does not suffer because of the bitter experiences in life given by Manu or by her mother. The memory of her life follows like a shadow. Reliving the incidents is a therapeutic process and it enables her to recover from her childhood trauma. The most vital and crucial loss is the loss of her self-image. As her husband’s sexual tortures cause a serious damage in her mind, she wants to escape from him. But Saru as an Indian woman, filled unconsciously with the Indian customs and traditional values, hesitates to avoid him,
and this pushes her to a resolution to meet him.

Saru faces antagonism mainly from two persons – her husband and her mother. Both of them represent the values and norms established by a patriarchal society. Ironically, a female can be made an agency for the effective promotion of a male point of view as in the case of Saru’s mother. The novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* projects the post-modern dilemma of a woman who strongly resents the onslaught on her individuality and identity.

When the human ego sinks into a flood of suffering and its power of toleration reaches the brink of denial, freedom to act becomes an existential necessity. Otherwise freedom to act at will, may lead to perfect liberty of the individual and disorder in social and human relationships. Jaya in *That Long Silence* is torn between love and hate, liking and disliking for her own husband and life situations. She is immersed in her own egotistical feelings. The smouldering fire of suppressed feelings, the maintenance of self-control, the pursuit of the mechanical role of mother and wife, the need to care for the physical and emotional needs of husband and children must remain suspended while her feminine soul and her suppressed feelings seek to find an outlet.

Jaya’s inner turmoil is so tense and acute that words fail to express her emotions. She is unable to speak out her trouble for she is a woman who faces the suffering of her life where obedience and loyalty have degenerated to the state of dogged subservience. Temperamental incompatibility between Jaya and Mohan leads to their marital disharmony.

To portray herself as a truthful wife she adorns herself by shaping her eyebrow, beautifies herself by cutting her hair short and smartens her look by wearing huge dark glasses. In the process she becomes small in significance and gets her value wiped out as an individual but it all goes unnoticed even by herself. Her protest mostly remains enfolded
in an uneasy wordlessness. Her absorption into the family hold is like engulfing an independent girl who deteriorates into the “stereotype of a woman: nervous, incompetent, needing male help and support” (TLS 76). The thoughts of the collapse particularly those relating to the possibility of Mohan’s death, keep constantly haunting her:

I had lived in constant panic that he would die. I had clung to him at night, feeling with relief the warmth of his body, stroking his chest, letting my palms move with his even deep breaths. The thought of living without him had twisted my insides. His death had seemed the final catastrophe. The very idea of his dying had made me feel so bereft that tears had flowed effortlessly down my cheeks. If had been a little late coming home, I had been sure he was dead. By the time he returned, I had, in my imagination, shaped my life to a desolate widowhood. (TLS 96-97)

Mohan, a small-time engineer, becomes a scapegoat to his officer’s corruption deals and accepts the illegal gratification on the advice of his colleague Agarwal, so that his family might live in comfort and his children might attend good schools. He says, “It was for you and children that I did this. I wanted you to have a good life, I wanted the children to have all those things I never had” (TLS 9). They move from their posh Churchgate house to the small flat in Dadar to evade the enquiry. But Mohan takes the misfortune in his stride. He accuses Jaya of “being indifferent” (TLS 116) and storms out of the house.

To Jaya, the experience turns out to be traumatic. The insecurity caused by the possibility of Mohan losing his job, his subsequent disappearance and the running away of her son when he is away with their family friends comes as a rude shock to her. The carefully built sparrow-house appears to be cracked and the insides get cruelly exposed.
Sudhir Kakar analyses the socio-psychological implications of the situation in the following passage:

Whether her family is poor or wealthy, whatever her caste, class or religion, whether she is a fresh young bride or exhausted by many pregnancies and infancies already, an Indian woman knows that motherhood confers upon her a purpose and identity that nothing else in her culture can. Each infant borne and nurtured by her safely into childhood, especially if the child is son, is both a certification and a redemption. (56)

Sarbjit K. Sandhu quotes the comment of Bijay Kumar Das on Jaya’s portrayal by Shashi Deshpande in his article *An Indian Paradigm of Character Progression* as “ambivalent attitude of contemporary independent minded Indian women” (129).

Since childhood, Jaya had designed her life according to the desires of the members of the family. For example, the titillating music of Lata Mangeshkar allured her but since her father had fascination for Palusker and Faiyaz Khan, the film music was banned in her house and her father’s remark, “What poor taste you have, Jaya?” (TLS 3) made her feel ashamed of herself. She had neither the courage nor the will to justify her own choice and this was the beginning of her predicament in establishing her identity. Alfred Moller comments on people like Jaya “the more they became restricted, the more they rebelled, [and] hence the guilt complex, and inferiority generated in them” (22).

Jaya is tolerant, submissive and taciturn, but the admixture of brilliance and creativity introduces complexity in her character by providing her an individual identity. She undergoes great emotional turmoil and suffering, though outwardly she tries hard to become a nice housewife. In the process of hiding her true self and to adjust with her insensitive husband, she gets reduced to a puppet.
Shashi Deshpande beautifully projects the characters of Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and Jaya in *That Long Silence*, who really have flair to establish themselves in society by means of their professional skills. Though Saru has established herself as a successful doctor, she cannot find peace of mind and professional satisfaction because of her husband’s inferiority complex and his outrage through physical assault during night. She has the confidence in her profession but leads her life in a confused atmosphere whether to live with stethoscope or to live as an ordinary housewife in order to escape from the tortures of her husband. Jaya in *That Long Silence*, on the other hand gives away her profession of writing to please her husband. Mohan, Jaya’s husband wants her to be a humble, polite and dutiful wife rather than a writer who glitters in the limelight. She too feels that fulfilling her duty at home is more appreciable than excelling in society. But in her conscience she feels defeated in life by giving up writing. The confusion in her does not allow her to have a peaceful life at home and at the same time does not allow her to come out of the shell to establish her identity.

In a patriarchal society, it is not uncommon to see a woman, potholed against an oppressive system, trying to turn the aggression against her into self-inflicted wounds and penance. This is due to her realization of the impossibility of turning their anger against those who are responsible for inflicting humiliations on her. This hostility against oneself is best personified in the mythical figure of Gandhari in the Mahabharatha. Gandhari is married to the prince of Hastinapur, Dhritarashtra. Initially she is proud of the culture and riches of Hastinapur on her arrival with her bridal entourage. When she realizes that her man is blind, she gets a complex of feelings. In her anger and frustration, she tears off a piece of cloth and ties it tightly over her eyes without uttering a word.

Iravati Karve recreates the situation of Dhritarashtra pleading with Gandhari to give
up her posture of penance as:

You feel, Gandhari, that you have been cheated and deceived, but think for a moment; in the three generations of our family every person has been cheated and deceived. I am pleading you not merely to ask for forgiveness but to persuade you to give up your fight against life. Give up your anger, not only against me, but against life itself. My injustice to you does not give you the right to do an injustice to your children, to your whole life. How can one wrong compensate another, Gandhari? (35)

Gandhari accepts to guide him and is stubborn in her penance. Another figure in the Mahabharata who establishes her identity is Amba. When Bhishma goes to Kashi he hears of Swayamvara at the King’s palace. He has already taken a vow of celibacy but goes to the palace for the sake of his step brother Vichitravirya. Amba, the eldest of all the princesses, desires to hold out her hand for the king of Salwa but Bhishma abducts all the three princesses for Vichitravirya. When they all reach Hastinapur, Amba pleads with Bhishma to let her go and marry a man of her choice. Bhishma allows her to go but the king of Salwa rejects her saying that she belongs to Bhishma as he had won her in the Swayamvara. Without any option, she returns to Bhishma and requests him to marry her. Bhishma, who has already taken the vow to be a brahmacharyan, snubs her. She is much offended and gets a burning desire to avenge Bhishma. With that fire she goes to the forest to perform penance.

Jaya’s married life is almost on the same lines as the sparrows. “She has built an edifice of security around her husband and children believing it to be a burrow into which she can crawl, reptile like, and feel safe” (TLS 148). Unconsciously she follows her
aunt’s advice to treat her husband as a “sheltering tree” (TLS 32) and she like Gandhari of Mahabharata symbolically bandages her eyes and grows blind to his weaknesses. Like Sita of Ramayana, who followed her husband into exile, Jaya follows Mohan into “the concrete jungle that is Bombay” (TLS 11).

In The Thousand Faces of Night by Gita Hariharan, the stories with which she had grown up with, had prepared Devi well for a life that would not be comfortable all the time. She develops a mechanism of self-defence against any onslaught from the other side. When she listens to the story of Gandhari, she broods:

I must have known, even then, that Gandhari’s pride, the fury that was to become her life-force, the central motive of years of blind suffering, was no piece of fiction. Gandhari’s anger, wrapped tightly round her head in a life-long blindfold burnt in a heart close, very close to mine. (TFN 29)

As she analyses herself in the role of Gandhari she begins to see her inner self better. For her, at that point, divine anger was understandable that would make heroism possible. She wonders how human anger could take so many clinical, pungent forms: “The lesson that was more difficult to digest was human anger: that it could seep into every pore of a womanly body and become the very bloodstream of her life”.

(TFN 29)

Devi asks her grandmother about the fate of Gauri and is promptly told the story of a mythical lady who was married to a serpent and yet led the life of bliss. When she enquires about the short lived marital life of Uma, her grandmother narrates the story of Amba. The mythical stories become so much a part of her life that Devi thinks that she is the very incarnation of all the avenging deities. If at all she is wronged she thinks, she will not take it
lying down but instead, she will be the mythical Devi-like avenger. She thinks she is beyond the normal course of life of others around her.

Devi considers the total neglect and indifference of Mahesh as an ultimate insult to her. He goes on long tours for weeks together on business. Devi confesses to herself that her education has left her “unprepared for the vast yawning middle chapters” of her life (TFN 54). Mahesh could not understand her feelings and thinks that she is, after all, leading a contended life with the comforts at her disposal. He teases her once thus, “Why don’t I pray to be born a woman in my next birth…Then I won’t have to make a living at all” (TFN 54). More than his long absences, it is his coldness that leaves Devi utterly dejected. Devi’s urge for a strong sense of revenge is manifested in different forms. She grows wild in her fantasies and seeks an escape in her weird imaginings: “I will grow a garden of weeds, those single-minded, wild, common blooded weeds that plunge their tenacious roots deep, deep “into the helpless soil”(TFN 58).

Devi’s inner conflicts take multiple forms of response from self-pity to revenge and from self-inflicted suffering to a strong sense of injustice. She feels suffocated in the atmosphere and plans definite means of escape. But being a sensitive child brought up in a disciplined atmosphere she has her own inhibitions about open action. The realization of her helplessness in taking any action makes her think of taking quick revenge. The traumatic experience forces her to explore the possible means of revenge.

In my waking hours I am still no conqueror. My petty fears, and that accursed desire to please which I learnt too well in girlhood, blur the bold strokes, black and white, of revenge. I write elaborate scenarios in my mind for the last act-humiliating Mahesh, saying all the things we have left unsaid. I do something bloody, final, a mark of protest worthy of heroines I grew up with. (TFN 104)
Devi experiments with some painting classes for a brief while but the snobbery there puts her off. By this time, the visits of Mahesh grow more frequent and much longer. “The routine of survival-violence” (TFN 58) becomes unbearable for Devi. Having listened to the stories of her grandmother she is prepared for a crude, oppressive onslaught. She recalls from her knowledge of mythology certain images of suffering and revenge. She broods: ‘… instead the knife draws a drop at a time. The games it plays with me are ignominious.’ Devi accepts her reparation as an inevitable part of a woman’s life: “That which is hard to get over, hard to her, hard to reach, hard to do, all that can be accomplished by penance: it is difficult to overcome penance” (TFN 67).

Devi thinks that she has in herself a particular version of the heroines she has grown up with. “I had, of course, to respond to my grandmother’s years of over-rich, unadulterated nourishment with a story of my own” (TFN 40). The notion of penance gets reinforced in a repetitive cycle in the life of the women-victims. Devi has the immediate example of her mother-in-law whose story is told by Mayamma. She was beautiful and was full of poise and charm. But without informing anyone, she walked out for no tenable reason. Baba accepted it with his usual stoic indifference and asked Mayamma to carry on the household business as usual as if nothing had happened. Devi could immediately identify herself in the story of her mother-in-law: “Had she misread Baba’s stories? Or had she turned them upside down and taken the contradictions, the philosophical paradoxes to their logical conclusion?” (TFN 64).

Devi wants to hurt the male ego of Mahesh and so she informs him that she had had intimate affairs with five of her boy-friends before marriage apart from the amorous relationship with Dan in America. But Mahesh brushes it aside which increases her inner turmoil all the more. She obviously searches for stronger forms of revenge. Mayamma’s
mother-in-law humiliates her for her inability to become pregnant. Mayamma undergoes religious rituals where the nihilistic acceptance of self has to be exorcised in order to reach the threshold of hope and fulfillment. Devi’s failure to become a mother becomes a crucial factor in her development as an individual. But unlike Mayamma, she liberates herself from the pressures of feminine role-play, to attain a state of free, creative individuality – thus giving a symbolic significance to her name, Devi. The negative view of femininity as evaluated in Mayamma’s trauma in terms of male-dominance and female subordination is reassessed. The sexual politics of motherhood becomes a major theme. Devi’s self-fulfillment does not lie in the bearing and rearing of children (the traditional notion of a woman’s role), but in recognizing her own inherent potential to live with herself on more positive terms.

After eloping with Gopal, she ruminates about her grandmother, father and mother and her own life from the beginning to the day:

Devi thought of her mother’s year’s unstinting devotion to the family. How lonely she must have been. … And I, thought Devi, and faltered in her thoughts. My grandmother fed me fantasies, my father a secretive love. My mother sought me out with hope, and when disappointed, pushed me forward in the direction she chose. You could say I have been lucky, I have been well looked after. I have mimed the lessons they taught me, an obedient puppet whose string they pulled and jerked me, an obedient puppet whose choices, but once or twice, when a hand wavered, when a string was cut loose, I have stumbled on-stage alone, greedy for story of my own. But I was too well-prepared and not prepared at all. America, Jacaranda Road, Mahesh, Gopal. I have run away from all my trails, tail between my legs, just as I
turned a blind eye to my father’s helpless thrashing about for an ally, or my mother lonely hand stretched out towards me. (TFN 136-37)

Thus Githa Hariharan portrays the dilemma in the minds of women, whether they be foreign educated like Devi or a dedicated family woman like Devi’s mother Sita or an uneducated village woman like Mayamma, who are unable to lead their life for their own sake. They suffer on account of not establishing themselves irrespective of their status of living. Women in India, due to their strong traditional and cultural bindings, struggle a lot to come out of their shell and live their life as they wish. Though they want to move forward, their inner self controls them as if the movement is prohibited.

The culture of the Brahmin community restricts women in such a way that their life is worth living only under the care of their husbands. If a woman becomes a widow, she should not attend any function, festival, celebration or social get together. She should isolate herself from the normal life with a specific dress code. Altogether she should lead a life with suppressed feelings. Anita Nair has beautifully portrayed it in her *The Ladies Coupe*.

Akhila in Anita Nair’s *The Ladies Coupe* feels trapped in a confining Hindu Brahmin society but never displays open rebellion even when her younger siblings get married. This sense of being trapped, imprisoned and isolated in a family as the bread-winner and the male substitute, is caused, from the psychological point of view, only by the fact that she never tells her mother or family members anything about her hopes, plans, sorrows and needs. But her friendship with Katherine has an everlasting effect on her. She takes her first step, towards breaking the restraints imposed on her, by tasting an egg. She gets her mother’s acceptance and endures her taste for eggs.
Akhila suffers from her inner self as well from the restrictions imposed upon her. She has become the master of the family. She says:

…it is so much easier and simpler to accept one station in life and live accordingly. A woman is not meant to take on a man’s role. Or the gods would have made her so. So what is all this about two equals in a marriage? (LC 14)

According to Akhila’s mother, a woman should be submissive and obedient to her husband. She believes, “There is no such thing as an equal marriage” (LC 14). When Akhila’s father died, her mother thought that the entire family has lost its hope and is like a fish out of water. But ironically her focus diverts towards Akhila, the eldest in the family. She makes her the man of the family. She talks of the life settlement of her sons and the marriage of her younger daughter. She never feels that Akhila will also have desires to have a family and a personal life of her own. Anita Nair beautifully pictures the dilemma in the mind of Akhila between the acceptance of the burden forced on her and her personal desire to have a family life.

During all Sundays, it is the duty of Akhila to switch on the radio. Akhila and her mother used to listen to the Horlicks Family Show ‘Suchitravin Kudumbam’. Though there are many characters in the show, Akhila is fond of Suchitra, who is capable, funny and warm. She can solve problems, distribute largesse and love. She is the perfect mother and wife. She is the woman Akhila wants to be. Akhila is an unwilling witness to the Sunday noon ritual of love sharing of her parents. She has a sour thought.

When will they realize that I am no longer a child?

When will they see that inside me flutter desires that I don’t understand? (LC 47)
She suppresses her feelings as ugly thoughts and accepts life as is given by her parents. Her anger on her father’s carelessness towards morning traffic and even towards domestic responsibilities makes her stronger. At the age of eighteen, when she was asked to keep cooked rice and a jug of water, she cried as to how she was going to provide food for the family that her father had abandoned so callously. She cried when her mother was dressed as a widow as she knew that this was what ultimately an Indian woman was destined to be, after her husband’s demise. That was her last cry and she stopped crying after that. She became rigid in her mind.

Akhila is offered a job in the income-tax department on ‘compassionate grounds’. She gets the responsibility of looking after the family. She starts taking decisions about her siblings’ education and their future. She tells her mother,

I don’t care what anyone says, but I won’t let you shave your head or exchange your pretty madisars for a saffron sari. Just because Appa is no more, you don’t have to turn yourself into a hideous monster. (LC 76)

These words give her mother a sense of relief and Akhila is forced to become the head of the household. She toils hard to bring up the family. When Narayan joins the tank factory as a machinist and Narsi becomes the first post graduate in the family and finds a teaching job, she feels the iron bonds around her chest beginning to loosen. She hopes for a reprieve, “Dare I breathe again? Dare I dream again? Now that the boys are men, am I to start feeling like a woman again?” (LC 77).

Ebe, Margaret Shanthi’s husband tells her that it is important to settle down in life before getting children. She asks him whether it is right to abort a child because abortion is a great sin according to the tenets of Christianity. But he convinces her that there is nothing
wrong in it scientifically and moreover it is their life and they should take decisions. She innocently feels pity on her servant maid who has four children and who does not think of settling down in life before getting children. Ebe says that he likes the tenderness in her and she should maintain her youth and should not appear like a woman. This startles her and instills in her a fear of old age.

Margaret Shanthi’s mother supports Ebe and advises her to tune up herself to Ebe. The whole family is under the spell of Ebe and tells her that she should thank God for getting Ebe in spite of all her mistakes. She feels inferior when she hears the advice of others. Ebe expects everything to run by itself without any hindrance except spending amount for that like food on the table, laundered and ironed clothes for him to wear, beds made, shelves dusted, towels changed, bathrooms cleaned, errands run all by invisible hands. He never bothers to appreciate how well everything is managed. She used to tell everything to Ebe so that he knows about her completely but Ebe has the least botheration and has his own style of life. He plans everything according to his wish and requirement including a child for them.

On the other hand Prabha Devi feels elated by her marital life in the beginning by the new relationships she gets through the wedding. Her husband understands her better and gives her happiness. He provides her all sorts of comforts and pleasures. But she wants to be known by her individuality and not to be identified as the wife of Jagdeesh. So she moves socially with everyone and tries to create an identity. But she forgets to draw the line of demarcation in her relationship with others. Pramod, one of Jagdeesh’s friends misunderstands her relationship and takes liberties with her. When she expresses her indignation, he accuses her that it was she who persuaded him by means of sweet smiles and lustrous looks. This comment makes her ashamed of herself and reminds her of her
mother’s words,

…with eyes forever downcast and busy hands; embroidering, picking, birthing babies, preserving order and bliss in the confines of her home and all the while chanting to herself; this is who I ought to be, this is the way to be happy. (LC 184)

She realizes that the words of old tradition are not mere preaching but words with a vision of reality. She decides to wipe out her desires and dreams. She becomes very calm. She thinks that she is losing the meaning of her life and becoming lifeless. She wants something meaningful in life and so she joins the swimming class. She has renewed her senses and regained her desires.

Marikolundu is another character in the novel. Her mother wants to retain her position in Chettiar Kottai and so she calls Marikolundu to come back to her. She makes her to stay with her for long, which marks the tragedy in her life. She is raped by the relative of Chettiar. She is unaware of its consequences and does not reveal it to anyone including her mother. But when she becomes pregnant, her mother does not believe her innocence and thinks that she was spoiled with her consent. Sujata believes her words and advises abortion. Marikolundu does not have a desire to beget the baby and so she is ready to abort it. Her mother tries in many ways with the help of her sister but everything fails. She delivers a boy and her mother names it Muthu. Marikolundu has no affection for or shows motherly care towards the baby, she does not even feed it. She returns to Vellore to rejoin her job and gets an opportunity for her studies but her destiny does not favour her. The Missies tell her that they cannot help her as one of them is moving from Vellore. She gets disappointed and loses
her hope in life.

When she tells her mother about the rape the latter takes her to Sujata. When she asks Marikolunu about the incident and why she did not inform them then, she tells that she did not think about the consequences. All she wants is not to think of that incident anymore. Sujata says that if she had told them about it then, they would have insisted on Murugesan marrying her. She immediately replies that she will die instead of marrying him, a filthy beast. Marikolunu’s mother is shocked to hear words and starts crying that “…your life is over and you’ll end up in the gutter like a street dog with its litter…you have nothing left in your life” (LC 245).

Akhila thinks about her mother’s words about marital life:

…it is so much easier and simpler to accept one station in life and live accordingly. A woman is not meant to take on a man’s role. Or the gods would have made her so. So what is all this about two equals in a marriage? (LC 14)

But when Narsi (brother of Akhila) wants to get married to a Principal’s daughter, she gets a feeling that somebody may ask him, “Don’t you think you should wait for your elder sister to get married before you think of a wife and a family? “ (LC 77). But no one raises that question including her mother and Narayan. She feels hurt and lets the anger grow in her flare. She asks to get a suitable bride for Narayan and to arrange both the weddings on the same day and time. Even then her mother and brothers never ask her, “What about you? You’ve been the head of this family ever since appa died. Don’t you want a husband, children, a home of your own?” (LC 145). Besides all this, her mother tells her that Padma, her youngest daughter is also becoming a woman and it is time to arrange for her wedding. Akhila sweats out to collect dowry, gold and diamond ornaments,
household furniture and cookware for Padma and gets herself ready to settle Padma when she is twenty two. But Akhila is thirty four and everyone in the family has crippled her into a spinster.

She is intrigued by the Nandi in the Shiva temple at Thirumullaivayil. The Nandi had turned its back to the lord and master in order to protect a devotee from being killed by his enemies. She places herself in a similar situation and thinks that like the Nandi she is also not normal as she has to protect other members of the family.

When Sarasa Mami and her children were excommunicated for making her daughter prostitute after the death of Subramani Iyer, Akhila’s mother thought that she also would not accept their decision. Akhila’s mother who is more or less in the same position of Sarasa Mami also curses her. She tells that if she were in her place, she would commit suicide. Only because Akhila has taken the burden of the family on her shoulders, she is unaware of the difficulties of life.

Akhila has lost her identity. She has been filled with responsibilities at various levels. Her mother made her replace the position of her husband as the head of the household. No one in the family called her by her name. Her brothers and sister called her Akka (elder sister) and her mother called her ‘ammadi’ (a special respect to adorn the head of the household status). Akhila’s dedication towards the family restricts her from getting simple pleasures like travelling by trains. She has never been to an unknown place by travelling in an overnight train. She used to dream of her pleasures and to get her desires fulfilled.

To divert herself from her routine monotonous life, Akhila enrolls herself in an open university to get a degree in history. She feels history can be studied better by a spinster than anyone else - to study the rise and fall of civilizations, to study the intricacies of what made a certain dynasty behave in a certain manner, to watch the unraveling of life from the
sidelines, to read about monarchs and concubines, wars and heroes, to observe everything but doing nothing. Akhila relates everything happening around her to her own life. One of her colleagues, Catherine brings about some changes in her life. She introduces eggs to Akhila. Initially Akhila hesitates but she wants to eat an egg at least to show that she has come out of her shell. She starts eating eggs daily and brings the egg case to home also. Her mother does not restrict Akhila from eating eggs but asks her to keep separate utensils for cooking eggs and throw the shell outside secretly. This shows that Akhila’s mother could not stop Akhila but to accept her in a decent way.

Akhila, who feels suffocated by the restrictions of her customs, wants to show her protest by means of eating eggs. This is tolerated by the members of her family only on the ground that she is the breadwinner of the family. Anita Nair effectively illustrates the state of Akhila as “All of Akhila’s wondrous explorations and magical discoveries were locked within the fragile shell of an egg” (LC 90). Her sister Padma criticizes her and says “We are Brahmins, we are not supposed to. It is against the norms of our caste” (LC 161). This sense of protest by Akhila is against the suppression of her self by others. Thus Anita Nair expounds the dilemma in the highly tradition bound Brahmin community which makes compromises in its quality in the wake of conflict between custom and ground reality.

Though Janaki, the oldest passenger in the coupe, has enjoyed all kinds of sophistication in her life, she finds emptiness in it. She cannot digest her son’s words and indifferent attitudes of her daughter-in-law. She decides not to be fragile and wants to be a confident being.

Margaret Shanthi, the school teacher, wants to protest against her husband for suppressing her feelings and her desires. She takes revenge on him by means of shattering
his self-esteem and shaking the very foundation of his ego. She classifies herself as water among the five elements of life. She says,

…I classify myself as water. Water that moistens, water that heals, water that forgets, water that accepts, water that flows tirelessly, water that also destroys. For the power to dissolve and destroy is so much a part of being water as wetness is. (LC 96)

When Ebe tells Margaret Shanthi that he needs only the tenderness in her and hates her becoming a matured woman, it shocks her and she starts thinking what would be his reaction if she becomes old and has the old age problems. She starts realizing life and understands the very truth of life.

…Of what I had to do next. If I were to him, where would I go?

Who would be there to reassure me that what I had done was right, that what I needed to do now was to put it behind me and start a new life of my own? Who would offer me a hand to hold and a shoulder to cry? (LC 112)

This is very common in every woman when she is in a confusion to take up a decision on her own. She needs support and approval from others to prove that what she has done is right. A number of questions arise in Margaret Shanthi. She asks herself whether she does work as hard as Ebe and whether does she has the right to have the expectations in life. She has no one to listen to her agonies. She knows very well that her parents never accept her feelings. If she thinks of divorce it is against her religious custom. So she wants to show her protest by shattering the self confidence in Ebe.

When she tells everything to Ebe with a view that he should understand her routine
well, she realizes that he has no interest to hear her. He shows a kind of disinterest in her words which makes her stop sharing everything with him. She stops talking to him and wants to know whether her silence affects him or not. But he shows no difference in his behaviour and thus she decides not to tell anything to him anymore. She loses hope in him and stops arguing with him and gives up expectations about her marital life. She loses the intimacy with her husband. She uses her knowledge in chemistry to take revenge on him. She understands that the only way to suppress his superiority is to shatter his confidence. Since he has much concern over his physique she decides to take her cooking as a weapon. Due to her tasty cooking and words of concern he loses his control over his diet and becomes a normal man. Margaret Shanthi gets success in her mission by getting a girl child and Ebe no more controls her. She feels content with her success.

When Akhila wants to spend a weekend with Hari, she lies for the first time to her mother that she is going to Mysore on an official tour with her colleagues. When her mother insists her to get permission from her brothers, she gets irritated. She feels very bad that she has worked for their growth and they never thought of her personal life but now she is forced to get permission from them as they are the men in the family. She tells her mother that she will not inform them as she feels that it is not necessary. Her protest in the form of eating eggs and not asking permission from her younger brothers shows her indignation at the enforcement of traditional way of life on her.

When Akhila analyses her own life, she starts thinking of her each step. She decides what she wants to do in life.

Akhila was not a creature of impulse. She took time over every decision. She pondered, deliberated, slept over it and only when she had examined every single nuance and point of view did she make up her mind. (LC 3)
Akhila’s intention to travel to Kanyakumari is to get an answer for her doubt whether, “A woman can’t live alone. A woman can’t cope alone” (LC 16). She wants to get answer for it from women of different lifestyles and the ladies coupe provides her a platform to raise her doubt and get the views of five different women with five different backgrounds.

When Janaki suggests that there is a chance of wedding for Akhila even at the age of forty-five and she can try through the matrimonial columns, Margaret Shanthi replies that men in their mid and late forties normally need a housekeeper to cook, clean and fetch for them. She adds, “If she is happy the way she is, why should she marry?” (LC 21).

When Jaya, Janaki’s daughter- in- law says that she is lucky to have Prabhakar as a husband as she is pampered by him every second, she compares her mother with Janaki and thinks, “Ever since papa died, mamma has had to do everything by herself. But she says that has made her a stronger woman than most” (LC 34). Janaki feels offended as if she is a meek and weak helpless creature. Prabha Devi, a fellow passenger in the coupe changed her life style because of the realization that modernity is not in dressing and way of speaking. She has become a sincere wife and a dutiful mother. But she finds out that she has become more monotonous and she has lost colour in her life. She wants to have a new start and so she starts to learn swimming.

Marikolundu, an uneducated woman and the real protagonist among the women in coupe narrates her life to Akhila. When she tells about the ruin in her life caused by rape, her mother cries and curses her as if she has nothing left in her life. She understands what happened to her and waits for a solution. Sujata advises Marikolundu’s mother:

…you must send her away and have the pregnancy aborted.

When she returns, send her back to Vellore. She was talking about the doctors offering to train her. …No man will be
willing to marry a woman who’s lost her virginity and even if we kept it a secret, what if he finds out later? He’ll forsake her then. But if she has a job, that will replace a husband’s protection.

(LC 246)

Marikolundu talks about the bitterness in her life to Akhila. She expresses her scorn in the following words:

…Husband’s protection! The phrase made me cringe. Neither Sujata Akka nor my mother ever had their husbands look out for them. The Chettiar took care of Sujata Akka’s needs. And Amma had to look after herself. The men in their lives had done nothing and yet to them a fulfilled woman was one who was married. Everything else was secondary. But I was so young then that these thoughts were like strands of a cobweb floating through the air. I didn’t know enough to think them through and even if I had, they would have dismissed it as arrogance…(LC 246)

Marikolundu feels that everyone expects her to be ashamed of herself but she has only anger and humiliation but not shame. When her mother leaves her with her sister for abortion, Marikolundu believes that ‘it’ will go off and she can go to Vellore to get the nursing training. But the baby is born alive and she is forced to feed and take care of it. She neglects the words of her mother and leaves the baby with her mother and goes to Vellore to get help from the Missies. But the Missies have planned to leave Vellore. She asks for their help to join the nursing course. But Missy K expresses her disbelief and says that she will never fit for the nursing job.

You have changed, Mari. At first when you came here,
I thought you would suit the job. You had so much joy in you; a willingness to please. There was a kind of glow that came from you that made me think you bring light into those dreadful hospital wards. Not anymore. (LC 252-253)

Thus Marikolundu loses hope in life and returns home. She becomes an assistant to Sujata and finds a safe place in Chettiar Kottai. She stays with Sujata and gives her every assistance both physically and mentally. She becomes the nurse for Chettiar Amma, who is kept in a room and chained to control bouts of madness. When Chettiar Amma dies Sujata asks her to stay in the Chettiar Kottai as her assistant. She leaves her home, her mother and son and stays with Sujata. She has a routine with no fixed patterns. She does everything for Sujata and sleeps well with the help of pills. After a year she realizes that she is not happy with her way of life but she has no other go than that. She says to Akhila about the turbulence in life, “I’m not ashamed. I’m not sorry. I am not ridden with guilt. I did what I though I had to do. If at all any emotion rocks me, it is anger. For valuing myself so little…” (LC 257).

When Sujata is worried that her husband is seeking pleasure from other women and comes home late daily, without thinking about the consequences Marikolundu gives herself as a prey to Sujata’s husband. Marikolundu does not reveal it outside as she thinks she could help Sujata by means of making her husband remain at home. When Sujata comes to know about her husband’s relationship with her, she shouts and curses her. She does not lend her ears to the explanations offered by Marikolundu. She makes her leave her home at once and for ever. Since Marikolundu has been well trained to face despair in life, she does not cry or feel fed up of what had happened to her. Since her brothers have been married and her mother is no more, she is forced to take her son with her.
Sheela, a fourteen year old girl, inspired by her grandmother’s thoughts could not tolerate the loss of her grandmother. When she sees the dead body of her grandmother in the van she is startled. She knows how much she would have hated to see herself as she is now. She recalls the agony once she had when she came back from a relative’s funeral. Sheela doesn’t want the world to see her grandma’s abandoned body without dignity. She plucks the wiry strands from her chin, brushes her hair, puts foundation (a skin-coloured cream put underneath other make-up) on her face, rims her eyes with a kohl pencil and adorns her with costume and jewellery. She feels happy to see her now as her soul wished to present the body in a pleasant way. People are shocked notice Sheela’s activities and they declaim that she has committed sacrilege. But she does not bother. She wanted to please the soul of her grandmother.

Akhila’s change is portrayed even through her change in the habit of eating. She prefers cashew instead of peanuts. The earlier Akhila thought that cashew was an excess, an item which she would not dare to tempt herself with. Now she feels a slow loosening within her, a sense of confidence that what she is doing is right. She prefers to be like Prabha Devi who is closest to her age and manner and likes her vibrancy and efforts to be a successful one by self-analysis. Akhila thinks that if Prabha Devi could triumph over her innate timidity and rise above traditions to float, she can also do the same. She gets the confidence that she should also learn to move on the ride of life rather than be cast on its banks.

Anita Nair’s portrayal of women on each category shows the inner turmoil in life whether to execute life’s design as they desire or to go behind the set of rules established by the society. She handles more number of women with different life styles but everyone of them finds herself immersed in an ocean of troubles.

Nalli in Kaveri Nambisen’s *The Hills of Angheri* strives hard to prove herself by
means of getting medical seat and later on entering into the course of surgery. Her zeal to be a surgeon is criticized by everyone and her father who has been a source of constant support to her also thinks that she cannot withstand as a surgeon. Nalli has a childhood dream that she would marry Jai and both of them together would set up a hospital in the village to help the needy there. But Jai’s wedding with another girl shatters her psychologically but she does not lose her heart and wants to come up by means of her professional skill. With great difficulty she gets a seat in the surgery course and in one of her letters she pours out her feelings to Jai:

You know how awkward I am, physically’, Everything I do looks ungainly, and surgery is so graceful and smooth. You did everything with ease, always, so it wasn’t a problem for you. What about me?

(HA 177)

When Nalli is persistent in doing post-graduation in surgery she gets no support from anyone at home. But still she does not resist her desire and so she writes to her Professor Dr. Bansali about her family background, the pressure to marry and her desire to do surgery. She pleads for his support and after some days she receives a reply from him with words of encouragement. Though she gains confidence after reading his letter that she is capable of doing surgery, she never opens the matter to anyone including her father. His letter bolsters her confidence. He assures that he will convince her father in this regard and help her to do her post-graduation in England if she desires so.

During one of her meetings with Jai in Mysore, she reveals her desire to do surgery and shows the letter from Dr. Bansali. Jai promises that he will speak to her father and get his concurrence. He argues with her father and convinces him but her father has a wavering mind to accept or not but he has to give in as she is strong-willed in her stand. On the
confirmation of her education in England the family drops the subject of her marriage. No one talks or debates on that topic. Nalli too had outgrown her stupid pride and takes her father to Bansali.

Nalli’s meeting with Bansali becomes an eye opener for her. His questions make her think that her profession has many meanings to life. He asks her, “In what way is a doctor different from a washerwoman?” (HA 182). When Nalli struggles to answer he himself replies,

No difference! The washerwoman washes clothes, wrings them and hangs them out to dry. She folds them neatly and brings them home.

A doctor has patients lined up for treatment. He sees them one by one, gives pills, ointment, injection, whatever, and cures them. What is the difference? Washing clothes, serving bodies. (HA 182).

Nalli’s mind wavers in confusion but she wants to speak her mind out. She struggles in expressing her thoughts. She is still in a confused state and on seeing her, Bansali gets irritated and shouts at her. “…No wooly headed girl will do surgery on my recommendation. Think clearly. Why? What? When?...(HA 182). The words of Dr. Bansali pierce her like a penicillin poke with a blunt needle.

When she reaches England, she decides not to give up her desire of proving herself. She says to herself: “I had decided. I will not let anything stay me from what I have come here to do” (HA 191). She decides to handle things there in her own way. She adapts to the new environment both mentally and physically. She says, “I practiced the stiff-hipped walk of a British women and laughed at myself” (HA 192).

Nalli gets inspiration from her father through his letters. She wants to help the family by sending money and she does it with love and expecting appreciation from the family. But
to her surprise, her father returns the money without mentioning any reason for that. He writes a letter in which he expresses his anxiety that she is unaware of the outside world which has a plenty of exploration both for personal and social life. After reading the letter she feels lonely and understands that her life has become unreal.

Nalli’s main aim is to build a hospital in her village Angheri and help the needy there. But she has low self-esteem and decides that she cannot carry on with the plan of constructing a hospital without the support of Jai. She expresses her desire repeatedly to Jai and the necessity of a hospital in the village. But he, who suffered financially during his childhood gives much more importance to money and fame and he is not ready to listen to Nalli’s words. Without Jai’s support she tries to establish a hospital on her own in the village but the patriarchal attitude of the people and gender biased thoughts of everyone never extend helping hand to Nalli which ultimately results in giving up of her idea. She survives in various places with the title of a lady surgeon but never gets a chance to fulfill her desire.

Thus this chapter talks about the mental instability of women who want to move forward in their life with the hangovers of the traditional aspects. In general women have more mental stamina than men but unfortunately women are emotionally weak in nature. Here nature means physical condition of woman and weakness may be explained in terms of their physical prowess. In this connection Virginia Woolf writes in her *Books and Portraits* “…when one sex is dependent upon the other it will endeavour for safety’s sake to simulate what the dominant sex finds desirable”(42). That is the main reason why women find it difficult to come out in life without grudge against other relationships both at home and in the society.

All the four novelists unambiguously portray their women characters in such a way that, the financial stability and education they have do not help them come out of their traditional set up
easily. Their mind oscillates between the clutches of the traditional values and the liberal hands of modern trend. Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, establishes herself as a successful doctor but struggles to establish her individuality in her personal as well as domestic life as she finds it difficult to move away from the settled norms of the society. Jaya in *That Long Silence* gives up her profession as a writer for the sake of her husband and tries to find comfort in life without any complaint of her suppression. She feels that it is her duty to make her husband and children happy and live peacefully. But she could not quench her quest to prove her identity and so she feels suffocated when her efforts to prove her worth as a writer were stifled.

Devi and Sita in *The Thousand Faces of Night*, want to live their life fully but the societal restraints and traditional grips make them undergo a life of others’ choice. Sita is forced to forget her Veena to prove her involvement in household chores as a sincere and dedicated family woman whereas Devi is compelled to lead a life which never gives her any conjugal satisfaction. She is not considered as a human being with a heart and soul. Her elopement with Gopal also proves that she is unable to live her life without the approval of the society and so she wriggles out of that relationship. Though she wants to live her life according to her desire, she is uncertain of the options open to her. The wavering mind in her does not allow her to live her life with the pleasures made available to her.

Anita Nair presents a handful of women in her *Ladies Coupe* who struggle in the swing of life which oscillates between the ends of tradition and modernity. Akhila wants to vent out her longings and fulfill her desires in life but she is unable to move forward due to the inhibition she has in the name of societal approval. She undergoes psychological trauma and finds it difficult to come out successfully as a woman living a life of her desire. Every character in the novel wavers between their desire to be modern and their inability to forego the traditional
rearing.

Nalli in *The Hills of Angheri* by Kavery Nambisan also proves that she is not an exception, by falling into the category of mediocre diffident women in the Indian society. She tries to come out of her low self-esteem and wants to prove her identity but the patriarchal dominance at various levels does not allow her to go ahead but increases her inferiority complex. Whenever she tries to come up with self identity, she finds something preventing her while trying to prove herself.

Thus all the characters of all the four novelists find themselves at the crossroads of change. They symbolize the present woman’s confrontation between the traditional grip and her desire to prove her identity.