Chapter III

Tradition Vs Modernity

Generally tradition is taken to be an orthodox and conservative set-up of everyday life in which no respect is shown for freedom of expression of one’s potentiality and personality and even his growth. The result is either unconscious or conscious suppression of one’s self. The terms ‘modernity,’ ‘modernism’ and ‘modern’ have been used rather loosely, almost synonymously, in all historical accounts of the literatures produced in the nineteenth century. Unlike the literature of the Medieval period, which was god-centered, the literature of the modern writers is secular, subjective, human-centered that adopts forms and ideas from the West especially from English. ‘Modern’ literature imbibing the spirit of European modernism is a typical twentieth century phenomenon, produced between the 1930s and the 1960s.

The term ‘modern’ normally characterizes what is new, present and non-conventional and is a contrast to what is old, past and conventional. There is a sense of ‘relevance’ to the present in its ordinary use. It also implies the decay and debasement of the present culture and the glories and certainties of the past. Homi Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture* comments,

> The new or the contemporary appear through the splitting of modernity as an event and enunciation, the epochal and the everyday. Modernity as a sign of the present emerges in that process of splitting, that lag, that gives the practice of everyday life its consistency as being contemporary. It is because the present has the value of a ‘sign’ that modernity is iterative; a continual questioning of the conditions of
existence; making problematic its own discourse not simply ‘as ideas’
but as the position and status of the locus of social utterance. (347-48)

Modernity is a complex idea and has many definitions. Modernity refers to
the modern life. Modernist is the adjective typically applied to the works of this era
that are complex and experimental, that strive to present new ways of describing
perception and consciousness. It is also a noun to name a painter, artist or writers who
follow the techniques and styles of modernism. Modernization is concerned with the
supporting scientific and technical development with the introduction of new methods
and equipment in the societies. It is reflected in improved medicine, healthcare,
transport, communication, mass production and domestic appliance. CB’s “Glossary
for Students” defines: “Modernity describes the long period of evolving ‘modern’
social, economic, and political forms and is most often cited in the two centuries from
the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and French Revolution of 1789 to the
twentieth-century post-war period.”

The recent approaches to an understanding of modernity have led to a variety
of views on it. Modernity is understood through two major spatial backgrounds and
situations. Modernity is a conglomeration of sporadic thoughts that developed
simultaneously at different places, sharing the common objective of the emancipation
of man. The land in which it emerged and an understanding of that space render a
specific meaning to modernity. The meaning is produced on the basis of the pioneer
experience of the new ideals and situation. The modernization process saw a linear
progress without many hindering factors from outside. This space provides
approaches to modernity ranging from ‘resistance’ to ‘retrieval.’ The second
background from which ‘modernity’ could be understood is the postcolonial situation.
Modernity did not emerge in the postcolonial geographical space, but was rather
introduced. Gemmill in his “Modernity and Contemporary Indian Literature,” describes it as “a broad based and dynamic concept involving an awareness of time, the will to revitalize traditions, a craving for novelty and variety, exploitation of social conditions for the fulfillment of human personality and a struggle for progress” (287).

According to Homi Bhabha, “The modern nation is . . . a historical result brought about by a series of convergent facts” (NN 11-12). This is the sense in which modern has always been used with the work of any age, because it is a question not of death but of outlook. Globalization and Modernity have exerted their impact on women in general and the Third World women in particular.

Modernity refers to enlightenment as it implies a new state structure and ideas leaving behind the regimentations of relations and norms and values. However, modernity is not a replacement of the old by the new. Today, modernity does not mean a subject-centered reason of enlightenment, nor is it an absolute form of knowledge. It is relational. Reason is basic to modernity, but unsoundness never disappears completely from human mind or from society and culture. Hence, modernity is not a synonym for reason. Homi Bhabha points out in his Nation and Narration that, “. . . the society of the nation in the modern world is ‘that curiously hybrid realm where private interests assume public significance’ and the two realms flow unceasingly and uncertainly into each other like waves in the never–ending stream of the life-process itself” (2).

In the course of modernity or modernization, the patriarchal legacy has led to a steady widening of the rift between the thinking subject and extended matter – which coincides with the gulf between inside and outside, between logical form and substantive content. On the internal or ‘subjective’ side, modernity tends to be stylized into a sovereign selfhood, a self-contained ‘identity’ which ejects from itself
all forms of otherness as modes of alienation and reification; in large measure, modern freedom or ‘emancipation’ has this connotation of self-recovery or self-possession. It is only through this retreat into inwardness, individuals gain ‘self-identity,’ a selfhood that cannot be dissipated through identification with others. The upshot of this development is the radical subordination of matter to mind, of nature - both internal and external nature – to the dictates of rational emancipated humankind.

In every age a tussle between tradition and modernity goes on. What is currently at a particular period is considered modern; what has gone by and is a part of the past becomes traditional. Champions of modernity criticise traditions. Tradition suppresses modernity. Tradition or modernity alone is inadequate as a living philosophy of life. In all stages of human development, both tradition and modernity have played a significant role. Tradition alone would bind people in chains whereas modernity makes them hollow. Therefore, a combination of the two is necessary for a society. Homi Bhabha in his *Nation and Narration* talks about the transition and ambivalence,

. . . that haunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it. It is an ambivalence that emerges from a growing awareness that, despite the certainty with which historians speak of the ‘origins’ of nation as a sign of the ‘modernity’ of society, the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality. (1)

The impact of modernity was noticed in the change in the writers’ worldview and in the creation of a secular, human–centered literature produced in different modern Indian languages. Indian writers began to adopt Western literary forms like the short story and the novel in the later half of the nineteenth century. The main
conflict is between the West and the East, the old and the new, modern science and technology and the simplicity of ancient ways. In his book *The Location of Culture* Bhabha says, “modernity and postmodernity are themselves constituted from the marginal perspective of cultural difference. They encounter themselves contingently at the point at which the internal difference of their own society is reiterated in terms of the difference of the other, the alterity of the postcolonial site” (281).

During the last two decades of the twentieth century in India, there was an emergence of the rebellious, self-assertive ‘New Women’ replacing the subdued, confined and submissive women. The word ‘New Woman’ has come to signify the awakening of a woman into a new realization of her place and position in the family and society. Conscious of her individuality, the new woman has been trying to assert her rights as a human being and is determined to fight for equal treatment with man. The ‘New Woman’ is not necessarily a Western model; she is rather authentically an Indian. Stevens points out that “As New Women, women stand for the nation and its quest for modernity – modernity understood as an admirable state of civilization, strength, and progress” (83). In the Indian society, since ages, traditionalism is deeply rooted; women have been the major relentless victims of circumstance and convention. Simone De Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* talks about what marriage does to a woman, “Queen in her hive, tranquilly at rest within her domain, but borne by man out into limitless space and time, wife, mother, mistress of the home, woman finds in marriage at once energy for living and meaning for her life” (435).

Traditional society categorized women into good and bad and indoctrinated both women and men to such an extent that by and large they came to accept these categories. A meek, docile, passive, obedient, virtuous, humble, kind and self-sacrificing woman was considered good. A ‘bad’ woman was one who was bold,
adventurous, active, articulate, and intelligent and questioning; the conduct of such a woman was not appreciated by society–a society which was shaped by men who laid down the norms of behaviour. Lata Mani in her article “Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India” says, “. . . colonialism as a partial modernizing force . . . warns against the simplistic application of narratives of progressive modernization to a study of nineteenth-century India. This is an important intervention in the debates on modernization. However, it leaves unproblematized the content of the concepts ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’” (120).

The post-modern spirit challenges the solidity of traditional ‘truths.’ Each edifice of truth has no stronger foundation than a house of cards for it is constructed on a ground whose apparent solidity only conceals a vacuous shallowness beneath. Chitra Banerjee’s fundamental preoccupation, revealed in her works Arranged Marriage, Sister of My Heart, The Mistress of Spices, Queen of Dreams and The Vine of Desire is to create a female universe out of, though not outside of the conventional male world. The male universe is not altogether shut out. There is the obvious effort to bridge the two. But there is a definite attempt at defining them as distinctive domains. The issue of modernity in post colonial India and the responses and reaction to it is dealt in her novels. It is observed that her works show a longing for retrieval of human values at the backdrop of the modern situation.

Chitra Banerjee is interested in charting out her diasporic journey while standing firmly in the native tradition. She tries to mitigate her diasporic condition by relating herself to the usable past. Her aim is to exploit a multitude of relational selves derived from her interactions with the place where she has lived. Her main characters are middle class Indian women, but this implication is left unspoken and creates the assumption that every woman is granted the same possibility of upward mobility
because, “the image of womanhood [is] an image based on purity and fidelity, on a morality highly regulated by patriarchal power” (Jain 1654).

In her works, Chitra Banerjee depicts woman in myriad roles-wife, mother, daughter and an individual in her own right. Though she is basically identified as a modern Indian writer, her concentration is on the lives of modern or urban based women in the United States and especially on the traumas and disorientations to which women are subjected to. For the female protagonists in her novels, education, women’s rights, way of dressing and pleasures are signifiers of modernity.

Chitra Banerjee’s novels provide a spectrum of feminist resistance in the diaspora; they are part of a complex effort at creating a space for a female subject where she can articulate her desires. This space is necessarily located outside of competing paradigms of traditional identity and modern identity. The protagonists Abha in “Affair,” Asha in “Meeting Mrinal,” Preeti in “Doors,” Rakhi in Queen of Dreams, Anju and Sudha in Sister of My Heart and The Vine of Desire respectively rebel against functioning as the repository of national/cultural identity. The protagonists often interrogate their own westernization, but they do not want to be pushed back into playing crusaders for their community.

The family forms the sub-set of the nation and through it the characters enter the nation. If the characters were to form the creamy elite class of the nation, then the narrative would have taken a different dimension. The communities seen in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novels are not static communities but diaspora communities and communities on the move. They cut across the national boundaries, move easily from one nation to the other.

Basically, the Indian family system is based on patriarchal norms. In a joint family, the managing head of the family is the father, who is also the supreme
authority in the traditional family set up. As a result, the traditional women are required to inculcate in themselves certain submissive and even slavish tendencies to perform as low and unequal partners of life.

After the father’s death, the responsibility of running the family goes to the mother. The woman has to support the family economically, emotionally, psychologically and physically. The heroines of the novels *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*, Anju and Sudha are brought up in the traditional joint family system in Calcutta. In the absence of males in the family, there is no one to take care of the Chatterjee family. So, Gouri Ma “shouldered the burden of keeping the family safe” (*SMH* 17). The three adult women Gouri Ma, Nalini and Pishi bring up the two girls Anju and Sudha. Everything about their lives and situations is traditional and conventional. As Simone De Beauvoir opines, they take by becoming a prey, find freedom by giving it up and aim to conquer the world by renouncing it (*SS* 437).

Gouri remains unusually brave at the death of her husband and later at her acceptance of every tragedy that has come her way and in the way of the Chatterjee family. Her potential as the head of a joint family, her resolve to run the bookshop without forgoing traditional values, the pain she has suffered due to heart attack, her resolution to marry off the girls –Anju and Sudha are all indicative of her motherly protectiveness with traditional values and modern ideas.

Anju’s father-in-law, Mr. Majumdar is the “master of the house” and is never bothered by any of the trivia of daily routine. Like a traditional Indian woman, Anju’s mother-in-law successfully effaces her personality from the room which she shares with her husband. Consequently, the room shared by the couple always seems only his. Traditionally, the woman is expected to play a subservient role. However, Anju does not accept the traditional concept that the sole purpose of a woman’s existence is
to please her husband. Though born in the patriarchal, male chauvinistic and male-dominated society, Sunil’s manners are that of a modern man. Sunil’s mother says, “Our Sunil, he had to take things into his own hands! Didn’t even inform us before, or else I would have begged him not to do it” (SMH 138).

The subordination of women in a patriarchal culture is symptomatic of hierarchization of socio-moral values between the sexes. Sunil’s father warns the Chatterjee women that “Even after the wedding, I’m prepared to send the girl back to her parents if I find something ugly” (SMH 140). It symbolizes the polarity between activity and passivity, between defiance and meek obedience. Women are often the symbols of passivity. In the story “The Bats” both mother and daughter are victims, who silently suffer under male oppression. The daughter in “The Bats” describes her mother’s acceptance of that: “when I asked her about [marks] it she didn’t say anything, just turned the other way and stared at a spot on the wall where the plaster had cracked and started peeling in the shape of a drooping mouth” (AM 3). Women are physically weak and financially insecure. The mother accepts the suffering and insults but never tries to break the relationship with her husband.

In “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs” uncle Bikram stands as a male superior. Though they are living in Chicago, Pratima’s position is similar to any woman in India. Jayanti Ganguli tries to pull her from the patriarchal domain as they go for a little walk in the evening. The uncle is angry that they have gone for a walk and have been victimized by the white children. As a figure of male authority, he is angry that they have gone out without his permission. The narrator says, “When the back of his hand catches Aunt Pratima across the mouth, I flinch as if his knuckles had made that thwacking bone sound against my own flesh. My mouth fills with an ominous salt taste” (AM 53).
A woman has to depend upon man at every stage of her life. As a girl she has to depend upon her father, and in the middle stage, she would be subjected to the domination of her husband, and in the last phase of her life, she has to adjust herself to live with her son. Hence, throughout her lifetime she is a stranger to freedom and independence: “Woman, as slave or vassal, is integrated within families dominated by fathers and brothers, and she has always been given in marriage by certain males to other males. In primitive societies the parental clan, the gens, disposed of woman almost like a thing” (SS 416). In the joint family system, though the role of woman is considered to be important, a woman is not given a place due to her. In The Mistress of Spices Daksha’s husband actually believes that a woman’s place is in the kitchen. Her psychology is affected and she becomes unreachable even within the family, she is the one “to whom no one listens so she has forgotten how to say. And inside her, pushing up against her palate enormous and silent, the horror of what she sees all day” (MS 80). The caged condition of Daksha and her disillusionment are presented thus, “. . . When I put the wedding garland around his neck, was I ever knowing that this is what is being a wife and mother, walking the edge of a knife with fear like a wolf waiting on both sides” (MS 61).

Chitra Banerjee talks about the concerns and perceptions of the new women and shows how they are not satisfied with the status of housewives bestowed on them by the male-dominated society. Sudha and Anju, through various interactions with their lovers, husbands, and in-laws, often bring out the negative aspects of the Indian male. Lalita has a rare gift of doing needle works; but she is not allowed to do her stitching because of her husband’s dominance. In this context Simone De Beauvoir’s opinion is worth considering: “In masculine hands logic is often a form of violence, a sly kind of tyranny: the husband, if older and better educated than his wife, assumes
on the basis of this superiority to give no weight at all to her opinions when he does not share them” (SS 449).

Lalita’s parents are also helpless even after sensing her sorrow and they are afraid to ask her what is wrong, as they do not have a solution. She sheds her silent tears to save them from embarrassments. She compares her own condition with that of Sita: “Who shall I ask to bless me? Ram, who banished poor pregnant Sita to the forest because of what people might say? Even our gods are cruel to their wives” (MS 272).

A self-respecting woman has no other options to advance on her way to self-reliance but to quit her home. The new woman refuses to be stifled under oppressive restrictions. The new woman’s demand for her rightful place, recognition and respect that is due to her is prompted by an inner urge to make her existence a meaningful one. Lalita mourns: “There are voices in my head every day. They whisper, He’s learned his lesson, things will be different now, would it be so bad to go back? . . . pray for me that I will remain strong enough to find it” (MS 272). The emotional satisfaction that she gets out of this ride is well described: “she comes out of a feminine world in which she has been taught feminine good deportment and a respect for feminine values” (SS 447).

The husband in “The Disappearance” never recognises his wife as a person, though they are living in America: “After dinner for instance she would start on the most elaborate household projects, soaping down the floors, changing the liners in cabinets. The night before she disappeared she’d started cleaning windows, taken out the Windex and the rags as soon as she’d put the boy to bed, even though he said, Let’s go” (AM 172).
The husband in “The Maid Servant’s Story” has been watching the maid for a weak spot to defile her. Though she has been a loyal servant, he wants to take revenge on her for not acceding to his lust. This is the predicament of women in a male-dominated society where women are victimized either as a wife or as any other woman. To quote M. H. Abrahams: “Women themselves are taught, in the process of being socialized, to internalize the reigning patriarchal ideology (that is, the conscious and unconscious presuppositions about male superiority), and so are conditioned to derogate their own sex and to cooperate in their own subordination” (122).

Chitra Banerjee’s characters, especially women, feel trapped in arranged marriages, because they have not married following the choice of their hearts but that of tradition. Hence they long for freedom. The Indian woman can apparently be called ‘a mistress of spices,’ as she is in control of the preparation of food in the kitchen, a space intimately attributed to her. Her kitchen, nevertheless, as a space of enclosure, is a representation and symbol of her submission.

The woman Sudha meets at the temple discloses her precarious existence with her husband and mother-in-law waiting for something to happen – like an accident so that she will die. Sudha is also dragged from one temple to another till she gets pregnant. The society is ready to treat woman as a ‘sterile’ woman. But it is being partial when a man is impotent. It is the greatest biological discrimination faced by all women. Bearing a child for the family becomes an issue of dignity. The woman is valued not for herself but for her ability to give the progeny through which the family name will pass on to the next generation. If she is devoid of this ability, even her life is in danger.

The female subordination is seen through Pishi’s comments: “the unlucky man’s cow dies, the lucky man’s wife dies!” (SMH 269). There are enough victims of
precisely this kind of trust women have been deprived of – their rightful share of people who have capitalized on their ignorance and total faith. If love, trust, faith and understanding are provided in any relationship there are no foggy areas of finance involved. “Ultrasound” concludes with Arundhati’s flight from her husband’s family and points to the start of a new life away from the constraints of a traditional Indian household and the tyranny of patriarchal traditions that deny her any agency. As Homi Bhabha says in *The Location of Culture*, “The struggle against colonial oppression not only changes the direction of Western history, but challenges its historicist idea of time as a progressive, ordered whole” (59).

This is the journey of the new women. However, while fighting against the established old system, there are occasions when all of them suffer from the feeling of aloneness and alienation which is natural as they are passing through a twilight period. Modern Indian women are marching ahead in every field and they are no longer a slave to circumstances and patriarchal domination. Many women struggle against the age old slavery and suppression. Inspite of their best effort to break the age-old patriarchy, even today they are seen suffering from some sort of weaknesses and complexes.

Like other women characters, Tilo in *The Mistress of Spices* also takes a bold step of becoming modern from the patriarchal structure for mistresses. As a mistress Tilo is not supposed to go out of the spice shop. Whenever she dislikes the job she should get back to the island that is back to the state of submission to the patriarchal condition. Even The First Mother, superior to the Mistresses does not have the power to come out of this subordinate life. The Shampati fire set by Tilo suggests that the ‘new woman’ has to fight for an identity. Identity is always in crisis but the search for it never fails, whatever the consequences may be.
Lalita’s indecision whether to call for help as a battered wife leaves her feeling guilty, “One minute I would think Why not. Next minute I would think Chee chee, what sharam to tell strangers your husband is beating you” (*MS* 269). She adjusts and accommodates unlike the modern women who find themselves and are forced into the background by the claims of culture. In an interview Chitra Banerjee says to Rettberg, I have studied both eastern and western literature, I also like to bring the two together in my writing. I feel it is a way to enrich both traditions. I have been influenced by many of the feminist ideas of Virginia W. as I was growing up, somewhat in the same way that Anju was influenced by them. The central idea that women need to have a room of their own is an important concept in *Sister of My Heart*, particularly as such an idea is foreign to traditional Indian society.

It is heartening to note that the cause of women’s education has the support of many reformers, philosophers and thinkers. Swami Vivekananda’s exhortation in *Women saints of East and West* is worth notice in this context “educate your women first and leave them to themselves” (Ghanananda 88). Dr. Annie Besant advocated women’s education on the ground that the education of Indian women depends on the rising of India as a nation. People welcomed with great joy the recommendations of the University Education Commission: “There cannot be educated people without educated women. If general education had to be limited to men or to women that opportunity should be given to women, for then it would most surely be passed on to the next generation” (Rath 22).

In the modern Indian society the youngsters are constrained by their jobs and individual preferences. Somesh encourages Sumita saying: “I want you to go to college. Choose a career” (*AM* 31). Sudha and Anju go to English-medium convents
for school education. After completing school education, Anju looks forward to getting enrolled in Lady Brabourne College’s English honours programme like the other children of upper and middle-class Bengali families. Anju is a voracious reader of Virginia Woolf and crazy after Elizabeth Barrett Browning: “I’m planning to study literature in college, so I can keep up with the latest writers and stock the best books” (SMH 89) says Anju. Sudha, the typical Indian traditional girl prefers to know “how to make pantua and lemon pickle” (SMH 88).

In the course of the novel, there is a reference to women’s liberation ideology: Anju says, “I’ll start in the English honours programme at Lady Brabourne College” (SMH 94) while Sudha prefers: “. . . to design clothes, she says. ‘Salwaarkameezes . . . I want to have my own company, with my own tailors and my own label, so that customers at all the best stores will ask for the Basudha brand” (SMH 89-90). Homi Bhabha comments in the Introduction to The Location of Culture:

A global cosmopolitanism of this sort readily celebrates a world of plural cultures and peoples located at the periphery, so long as they produce healthy profit margins within metropolitan societies. States that participate in such multicultural multinationalism affirm their commitment to ‘diversity’, at home and abroad, so long as the demography of diversity consists largely of educated economic migrants – computer engineers, medical technicians, and entrepreneurs, rather than refugees, political exiles, or the poor. (xiv)

Sunil completed his higher education and works with “his malfunctioning motherboards” (SMH 136). This attitude towards modernity as embodied in an English education and western outlook on life prove inadequate in the modern Indian
cultural situation. The inability to sever the deep roots of Indian culture and tradition is exposed.

The new education has gradually made Anju conscious of the futility or the emptiness of the various long-preserved notions and taboos about the woman she has started opposing and breaking down. Anju writes to Sunil: “I’ve moved my stuff out. Inform the manager if you want to continue to keep the apartment. Or else, for a fee, she’s willing to pack your things and put them in storage. Have removed my name from the joint bank account. No point making deposits there for me. Did you really think I was going to continue taking your money?” (VD 267)

Anju is bewildered when she is exposed to two opposing ideologies. She travels through the poignant impasse of whether to carry on with the old tradition which she has observed while growing up or to embrace the liberated life infused into her by the modernized American society which is free from traditional morality.

Gouri has been very fastidious in practicing Indian culture and she teaches the same to Anju and Sudha. She guides them but never forces them to do what she wanted them to do. She gives them full freedom to move out and explore the world and do things according to their wishes. As far as the customs are concerned, she teaches them the norms and rules of a traditional family but never restricts them to her own orb. One day Anju and Sudha wanted to go for a movie and dared an afternoon escapade to a theatre knowing that their parents would not let them go out. After coming home they are punished for their behaviour. This becomes a ritual every week and both the girls consider it an unnecessary tedium. Everything reminds them of the importance of getting a bridegroom from a good family. Anju is warned not to mingle with Sudha and encouraged by ladies to befriend girls from “important families, especially those who have eligible older brothers . . .” (SMH 27) and is assured of
marriage “with a man who lets you [her] go to college, and lets you [her] work, too, if you want it” (SMH 110). Sudha is well aware of the Chatterjee family’s reputation and dares not to elope with Ashok as that will definitely put the family’s reputation in jeopardy, and doom her cousin’s chance of marriage to a respected family.

A deviance in the set trend is considered to be an act of rebellion and disobedience. It is an irrevocable misconduct on the part of the women to think for themselves, assert their individuality and become economically independent. An act of defiance on the part of women leads them to be ostracized by the family and eventually by the community. This is proved by a woman Sudha meets at the Kali temple who says, “They want to get my husband married again. He would be happy enough. He never did care for me – thought I was too dark from the start” (SMH 236).

In traditional Indian households, there is a great longing for children. However, there is an aversion for the girl child. A son is preferred to a daughter. Sudha says, “I spit on this society which says it’s fine to kill a baby girl in her mother’s womb, but wrong for the mother to run away to save her child” (SMH 268). As Anju grudgingly points out that this society wants its women to be nothing more than “good breeding stock,” (SMH 114) while men are spineless jellyfish even as their yet-to-be-born female infants face death at the hands of a cruel, uncompromising society that prefers boys.

When whole families are together in the diaspora context, the daughter, who lives most of her life within the American culture, has little choice but to remain in confusion even when she feels more at home with her American identity. It is still difficult for an American – born daughter or young woman living in America to defy her parents’ wishes in the choice of her career or marriage. She is constantly alert to the mantra ‘what will others say?’ In contrast to the Indian women or first generation
immigrants in America, the second generation has changed and become modern totally. As to Geeta in *The Mistress of Spices*, it is left to her grandfather to understand and make her parents understand. This can only happen because of his great love for her and it is not without suffering either. Her grandfather condemns: “Chee, chee, no shame at all, making talk of love in front of her parents, in front of me, her grandfather” (*MS* 89). As a Mistress, Tilo also wants to know what would happen if the mistress would violate the old rules: “Tilo ever too confident . . . what happens when a Mistress grows disobedient, when she seeks her own pleasure?” (*MS* 93).

Americanization has been accepted in totality when the young woman of “The Word Love” decides to live with her boyfriend outside the institution of marriage. The nameless protagonist tries to explain to him about the Indian culture and her mother’s life style in India: “She lives in a different world. Can’t you see that? She’s never traveled more than a hundred miles from the village where she was born; she’s never touched cigarettes or alcohol; even though she lives in Calcutta, she’s never watched a movie” (*AM* 58).

The nameless protagonist’s mother is rigid only strengthening the young woman’s feelings of guilt. The daughter becomes frantic about the loss of contact with her mother, and perhaps by extension, with her Indianness. The choice between emotional dependency and cultural loyalty has led to the realization that there exists the third choice – personal liberation: “You will not need it in your new life, the one you’re going to live for yourself” (*AM* 71). In America the Indian concept of formalized relationships and institutionalized togetherness holds no water.

Meena of “Affair” has deliberately distanced herself from her Indian upbringing, first by refusing to accommodate herself to her husband, Srikant, and
secondly by not allowing the female members of her community the opportunity to criticise her decision: “She’s been having an affair for two months now” (AM 260).

Chitra Banerjee believes that India has ever been a land which allows for the plurality of traditions and ways. In a traditional society bride viewing is done at the girls’ house with all the elders’ presence. During the bride viewing, the to-be husband expects her to be nervous, ‘yearning to be chosen.’ Instead, “when she’d glanced up there had been a cool, considering look in her eyes. Almost disinterested, almost as though she were wondering if he would make a suitable spouse” (AM 171).

Habituated to be the one who is in the role of the arbitrator – evaluating the woman as commodity – the man is surprised at the silent challenge and agrees to marry the woman.

Anju compares women to animals at a fair when bride viewings are done. Sudha’s bride viewing is simple and happens at short notice, “She called the night before and said they were coming to Calcutta on some business and would like to stop by in the afternoon for a few minutes” (SMH 120). Sudha answers Mrs. Sanyal’s questions without a trace of irritation.

Anju gets ready as soon as Sunil arrived from America: “we will have a bride-viewing and they will let us know his opinion . . . it’s a groom-viewing as well” (SMH 132). Ahuja arrived from America only three days before the wedding: “That was when I met him. I had seen a picture, of course . . . ’ ‘But when I saw him I realized the picture had been taken many years before’ ” (MS 100). Marriage is thus considered a great ambition and the ultimate goal of a girl. The traditional feminine virtues and graces are instilled in her so that she could be an attractive ‘commodity’ in the marriage market. Thus India is a country known for its rich culture. To preserve this, parents have to inculcate Indian values in their children.
The prime concern of all Chitra Banerjee’s women is marriage. Marriage is not totally ruled out in the lives of the modern and liberated women. According to the Indian tradition, marriage is a point of maturing and the beginning of a new way of life and “It’s a thousand-year-old mantra of the Vedas and defines luck as cattle and horses and vassals” (SMH 164). The Sastras and Epics glorify marriage as a holy union. The sanctity of Agni or the holy fire, the ‘Sapthapadi’ (seven steps) and mutual fidelity till death are all shared in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s fiction.

Rigveda speaks of marriage as a union of two persons for full development. The words jaya, jani and pattini indicate the respectable position of women in the family. Chitra Banerjee makes use of the traditional Hindu concepts of marriage ceremony:

exchange the garlands . . . The ends of our garments are tied together, and we walk seven times around the sacred fire . . . ‘My heart is yours, as yours is mine,’ I repeat after the priest, pronouncing each word as clearly as I can. ‘For seven lifetimes will I follow you to the ends of the earth.’ The ceremony is going to continue for a long time – the putting of sindur on the woman’s forehead, the recital of more mantras, the official giving away of the bride, the recital of even more mantras.

(SMH 166)

Thus it proves Rudd’s words, “Each stage of the marriage process was infused with religious meaning, sacralising and integrating the kinship system within the socio-economic sphere” (92).

Marriage is the single theme that unites all the female protagonists of Chitra Banerjee’s novels. Simone De Beauvoir says, “Marriage enslaves her to a man, but it makes her mistress of a home” (SS 420). Nearly all the young Bengali women dream
of a magical wedding with a handsome prince who will take them to his kingdom beyond the seven seas. Dollar-dreams and the longing for NRI husbands force numerous women to quit secure homes and their desi support structures only to find constricted domestic spaces and disillusionment in an alien land which they imagine to be an exotic land.

The young girl Jayanti fancies in her dreams: “Will I marry a prince from a far-off magic land?” (AM 54). Sumita is like any other Indian girl who hails from a well-to-do upper middle-class Indian family. At her age the dreams of marriage are based on her little exposure. Her notions of marriage are rather vague, derived as they are from the exaggerated art of Indian films, movie magazines, and the advice columns in ladies’ periodicals. Her horoscope matches, and her marriage is fixed. This itself signifies the passive role of a daughter who ought to obey male authority as she remembers the age-old Indian dictum: “A married woman belongs to her husband, her in-laws” (AM 19).

Screening horoscope for brides is a traditional practice. The Chatterjees decline a proposal of marriage for Sudha because of the family name and former status. The suitor, Ashok, is from a lower-caste family, “a family that has made its money in trade” (SMH 98). Despite his love and other qualities that would make him a better husband, he loses out to the more renowned and wealthy Sanyals. The Sanyals and the Majumdars (the family Anju is married to) are polite enough not to demand a dowry, there is no way that the Chatterjees are going to let the world think that they were “tight-fisted at their daughter’s wedding” (SMH 118). In their attempt to give the girls ‘magnificent trousseau’ as befitting their old ‘genteel’ position, the mothers end up spending lavishly even though they really cannot afford such luxury: “Dowries are a slippery issue, I have come to learn. A good bridegroom’s family
never demands a particular amount of money, or a certain list of items. That would be too gauche. And so the bride’s party has to anticipate their wishes and go beyond them, because if they don’t, it might affect their daughter’s future” (SMH 110).

As soon as the marriages are fixed, the mothers commence to discuss family matters with the girls, though they are in no condition to rationalize. Anju contemplates: “Do they think we are wiser now, just because we are getting married? Don’t they see that in my current love-struck state, I am barely capable of rational thought?” (SMH 150). In an interview with Scott Rettberg Chitra Banerjee remarks: “I’d say that the rituals and ceremonies undergone by young men in traditional lifestyles are different from those that women undergo. In modern families, though, there are very many similarities. In Sister of My Heart I am portraying a very traditional family. In Bengal, so the rituals are quite unique.”

The bride’s family is to observe a lot of rituals so that no ill fate will befall the boy’s family. The girl’s parents, whatever their status is, are to be subdued and be polite towards the boy’s family in general. Sudha and Anju have celebrated a marriage with relatives approving the couple – the couple bowing down dutifully to touch their feet and receive their blessings for a happy married life. The wedding is a splendid one and every member of the Chatterjee family is proud of the arrangements. Thus after the grand marriage the girls are happy and are sent to their in-law’s house. However, the young girls Anju and Sudha are not for the patriarchal set up. Marriage and the following annihilation of the wives’ selves is visible when the girls realise that they are no more the daughters of Chatterjee’s but daughters-in-law of the husband’s family. The woman’s state is her uprooted self.

There is an obsession with marriages and eligible bachelors for marriage: “the good luck sindur that proclaims to the world that she is a married woman, with a new
life ahead of her” (SMH 37). Sudha has changed into a traditional married woman: “Who is this Basudha who applies to the parting in her hair after bath each day an unwavering line of sindur to ensure her husband’s prosperity? She puzzles me . . . A ring of keys weighs down the end of her sari, but she bears the weight well” (SMH 187). Willingly she yields to the demands of marriage and moulds herself up to the dictates of her husband.

Later Sudha decides to return to Chatterjee-home for protection. A girl brought up under the strict discipline of a traditional family, takes a decision single handedly to return home inorder to save the unborn child. She thus breaks all fetters considered sacred by society. In this single act she metamorphoses from the timid Calcutta home maker to a rebellious woman. Thus if the women do not find happiness in marriage, they do not go out in search of more fulfilling relationships. They boldly stand alone to face their life. All Chitra Banerjee’s women protagonists are confident, educated, attractive and assertive. In an interview with Preeti Zachariah Chitra Banerjee says, “Strong women, when respected, make the whole society stronger. One must be careful with such rapid changes, though, and make an effort to preserve, at the same time, the positive traditions of Indian culture.”

Anju realizes that marriage has transformed her from the old familiar one to a wild and magical woman. Not only the mothers, even the servants watch them with “awe and a certain respectful formality” (SMH 154). Anju observes, “Marriage has changed me in unexpected ways” (SMH 180).

Like all educated girls of the present age, Deepa Mashi in “The Maid Servant’s Story” wants to choose her own life partner and make her own decisions. This story reflects all the inner turmoil felt by a woman who has chosen to be free
from traditional restrictions and whose values are undergoing a drastic change when she is placed in a new locale where the values are far different from her own past life.

For Indian women, marriage means enslavement and subjugation. But the second generation immigrant woman in America, Rakhi follows her own view and is free to choose her ways and means. Her husband, Sonny interferes but it is only by way of guidance and advice. There is no super imposition on her thoughts. Unlike other married women slavishly tagged to tradition, she has her own say. She unveils and unfurls herself to activate the creative urge stifled within herself and this act of unburdening herself is a compromise with herself.

Bitter realization comes to Mrinalini Ghose rather late. Her married friends have at least husbands to call their own and they are Mrs. so and so. This type of thinking is merely Indian women’s weakness. Even if they don’t enjoy a happy life with their husbands, they are proud to be the married women. Thus Mrinalini is a typical Indian woman in modern life style.

Financial independence and American clothes are markers of individuation made synonymous with “westernization.” Any transgressions on these issues are perceived as threats to national identity. Sumita of “Clothes” has her transition to America that is symbolized by her clothes and their colour. The traditional Indian attire for a woman is a sari and each one has its own purpose. Her clothes also indicate her progression from daughter, to wife, to woman. Despite the traditional ambience of the household, there is a speck of revolution in the young women, conflicts in their thoughts and deeds. Sudha says, “I’m tired of these old-women saris you make us wear. You would think we were living in the Dark Ages instead of in the Eighties. I bet there isn’t another girl my age in all of Calcutta – except poor Sudha,
of course – who is forced to dress like this. Why can’t I wear trousers, or a maxi, or at least some kurtas once in a while?” (SMH 67)

Anju, the rebellious bookworm, is angry at the world. She always questions the society that dictates how women should behave, dress and act. Tilo says, “When I came to America I was given no items for outdoor use, just the frayed saris, colour of stained ivory, in which I greet my customers” (MS 126). The voice inside her warns her but she has deftly refused to listen to the voice. In a public restroom she changes her clothes. She goes out and waits at a bus stop with others. It surprises that no one could recognize her.

Chitra Banerjee is very serious about economic independence of women. Most of the women leave money matters either to their fathers or their husbands or in some cases to the accountants. With a couple of exceptions all of them blindly surrender the administration of their financial affairs to someone they believed “knew more” in these matters. These all are educated, bright women – some with jobs, some without.

Gouri Ma takes charge of the bookshop, after her husband’s death. Though the bookshop does not run profitably, she has to run it to escape from the clutches of poverty. Anju says, “in spite of the long hours mother puts in at the store and her determination to get us whatever a daughter of the Chatterjees must have (That’s something else I don’t understand . . . Still, the store never seems to make a profit, and each week she has to go over our household expenses in her careful, frowning way, trying to cut costs)” (SMH 25).

In “The Disappearance,” the extent of the woman’s oppression within the marriage is obvious. The protagonist is not allowed to pursue her financial independence. In many ways, she is the victim of an arranged marriage and male domination. Though she lives in America, she must follow patriarchal structures.
Somdatta Mandal in his article “The New Bengal Movement in Diasporic Indian English Fiction” says, “independence is a mixed blessing. It means walking the tightrope between old treasured beliefs and surprising newfound desires, and understanding the emotions which that conflict brings” (14).

The writer through Anju gives a clear picture of the need of economic stability for emancipating women. Sudha’s father left nothing other than debts. This has been one of the reasons for her inability to perform academically well even if she is as intelligent as Anju. She chooses to be traditional which also demands a lot of courage and tolerance. The difference in the attitude of the two cousins is described through Anju: “When I carelessly tore my sari borders, she would mend them with stitches so tiny they were almost invisible. And she made the best mango chutney I ever tasted” (AM 207).

The traditional society expects a woman to behave in accordance with the whims and fancies of her husband. Economic independence and independent identity are not meant for a woman. However, the new woman is capable of finding her own way and is not just an appendage to man. Economic independence gives her ample scope to fight against subordination and suppression. In her childhood itself, Lalita makes economic independence as her goal in life. The prominent feature of the new woman in the changed India is her constant effort to live as an economically independent individual. Sudha’s choice of becoming financially self-reliant by accepting the job of a nurse for an old man proves her ultimate decision.

The mother image is glorified in the Indian tradition. Chitra Banerjee questions the much – venerated image of ‘motherhood.’ She also captures the tragic implications of traditional Indian women caught between the traditional Indian society and the modern industrialized world. It was believed in the past that women were
meant for the kitchen but this is no longer the perception of the new woman. Despite their belief in the equality of the sexes, the boys of the new generation are still to shed the age-old male perception of a woman’s place in the family and the work she is expected to do. Sudha realizes “I want a baby more than anything else in the world” (SMH 224). Lalita in The Mistress of Spices asks: “Why not I go see the doctor and see what is wrong, why I am not becoming a mother” (MS 269). In contrast to them Meera in “A Perfect Life” is not willing to give birth to a child. She is looked as a stranger by her own friends who ask her: “Don’t you mind not being married? Don’t you miss having a little one to scramble onto your lap when you come home at the end of the day?” (AM 75).

Women in the novels of Chitra Banerjee question the validity of the accepted set of values and rebel against the existing moral codes and social norms which deny women the oxygen of freedom that nourishes individual self. To view them as mere champions of feminism is doing them an injustice. Her women are conscious of their emotional needs and hence cry for a change of order that starves them of individual fulfilment. They are women who long for an atmosphere congenial for self-expression and conducive to self-fulfilment.

Divorce, separation or annulment of marriage under law offers a possibility of freedom from endless suffering in an unhappy marriage. It is a process of giving legal recognition to the breaking up of a relationship already shattered by the irreconcilable disparity in the character of two persons. For ensuring harmony in the marital relations, an acceptance and adjustment of the wishes, attitudes and sentiments of both the partners are necessary. But when the needs, wishes or individuality of one of the partners are ignored discord is the result.
Hameeda and Daksha’s lives in *The Mistress of Spices* are not too different from that of Lalita. Hameeda’s husband divorces her not because she has no male children but also because of the prospect of marrying a girl younger and prettier with a good financial background. When she discloses this, her voice ‘dips into bitterness.’ Daksha’s condition is still worse. Her life has become mechanical: “Every night coming home from the hospital to cook, rolling out chapatis hot hot with ghee because her mother-in-law says old food from the fridge is good only for servants or dogs . . .” (*MS* 80).

Sudha’s departure from her husband’s house is never viewed with sympathy. Her mother scoffs at her. Nalini calls her a stubborn, impetuous girl, “A woman can have many children, after all, but a husband is for ever . . .” (*SMH* 266). Abha in “Affair,” decides that since she and her husband are unhappy, she will leave her husband, and make a life of her own. The women in “The Word Love” or “The Maid Servant’s Story,” change their lives or their patterns of behaviour within set relationships even if it means suffering for them.

Inspite of her power and freedom, Mrinal is envious of Asha’s happy married life. Now that she realises how sad and empty Mrinal is, Asha is able to accept her own sorrows and miseries as something inevitable. She understands that single women and divorced women are on the same path in search of happiness. Asha worries about her position in the society as a single woman. Though it is not her fault, she has to undergo a lot of troubles and she feels:

I tried attending a few affairs, dinners and pujas and graduation parties for children going on to Standford or Harvard. But I’d be the only woman in the room without a husband, and the other wives, even those too well bred to whisper, would look at me with pity, as though at
something maimed, an animal with a limb chopped off. Behind the pity would be a flicker of gratitude that it hadn’t happened to them, or a gleam of suspicion because now I was unattached and therefore dangerous. *(AM 276-77)*

There seems to be no permanent escape from this cycle of violence because this is India, where a divorced woman has no future. It is a theme of “The Maid Servant’s Story.” The mother is devastated when she learns that her husband has tried to molest the maid servant during her absence. However, she is afraid to leave her husband because there is no future for a divorced woman in her society.

In the story “Doors” when Preeti eventually quarrels with Deepak, it is because she has asserted her right to closed doors and privacy. This marginalized woman’s assertion of her individuality brings resistance. When the husband leaves her she hears “the door finally clicked shut, she did not know whether it was in the guest room or deep inside her own being” *(AM 202)*. However, she can choose to be overwhelmed by her own unhappiness or strike out on her own as does the protagonist in “The Word Love” who thinks “Surely there’s another choice. But you can’t find the words to give it shape. When you look down the empty street, the bright leaves of the newly-washed maples hurt your eyes” *(AM 71)*. Hence the women who face conflicts come to a crisis before they can make a decision to be free from the traditional norms.

The intolerable extremity forces Lalita to call for help and she decides to leave her husband, with the help of the number given by Tilo. This makes her believe that things may be different now and expects that he would have learned his lesson. So “I try to push them . . . away. I remember what you said to me just before I left” *(MS*
The age-old institution of marriage has been undergoing a tremendous change in the modern times.

Meena and Abha, to terminate their unsuccessful marriages directly attack on the institution of arranged marriage and challenge parental authority. Matching horoscopes and hasty bride-viewing are not always conducive to lifelong relationships. As Abha herself realises, “The old rules aren’t always right. Not here, not even in India” (AM 270). Sudha bails out from the marriage and drags herself to single motherhood, dishonor and poverty:

I am washing away unhappiness, I tell myself. I am washing away the stamp of duty. I am washing away the death sentence that was passed on my daughter. I am washing away everything the Bidhata Purush wrote, for I have had enough of living a life decreed by someone else. How easy it seems! What power we women can have if we believe in ourselves! (SMH 271)

Chitra Banerjee’s novels are remarkable because they present a remarkable saga of women with warmth, strength, sharpness, innocence, and self-respect that awaken their responsibility as individuals; and as a result they throw off the yoke of subjugation imposed on them by their selfish, shallow and egotistical husbands. Sudha, Anju, Lalita, Abha, Meena, Meera, Rakhi, Daksha, Hameeda, Tilo and the nameless heroine in “The Disappearance,” are emblem of love and sympathy and therefore of light. Their heart is pure in which a lamp shines. Purity and sincerity of heart is a light which God introduces into the heart.

The new woman has become more vulnerable and her problems have increased. No longer can she retreat to the seclusion of her kitchen and at the same
time the male domination has tried to overpower her. But they have fought on to seek
an identity, ‘an identity that she had lost in thousands of years of slavery.’

Chitra Banerjee sketches her protagonists’ gradual transformation but
sometimes there is a conflict between Anju and Sudha, one still holding fast to
traditional Indian values of life and the other an adventurer in a capitalistic culture.
Sudha wants to get away from India so that all her troubles would be over. She wants
to get away from the claustrophobic traditional “Indianness” and gain her freedom.
What Homi Bhabha says can be considered in this context: “The move away from the
singularities of ‘class’ or ‘gender’ as primary conceptual and organizational
categories, has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions – of race, gender,
generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation – that inhabit
any claim to identity in the modern world” (LC 2).

One weakness that has crept into the new woman is the overdose of suspicion
and doubt: “His dismissal of this terrible thing had happened to her as a bad drug trip
infuriated her . . . She’d called him for help, and he’d failed her” (QD 202). This
makes the woman not only see certain design or some selfish motive in man’s
intentions and behaviour, but also see it magnified. It should not be forgotten that
man–woman relationship can’t be restored to the axis of equality and liberty through
constitution and legislation alone, but through mutual understanding, love, respect,
and dilution of the egos. Sonny, Rakhi’s husband is finally able to recognize her
strengths and her weaknesses which have been latent so far. This helps them to
develop a better understanding, thus opening the door to their happiness:

She spins to the circumference, is held and spun back, once, twice,
three times. She’s astonished to feel herself smiling. With each
revolution, she’s increasingly a part of the music, part of the scene, and
as she dances to the darkness inside her eyelids and feels the sweat sprout on her skin and the beat throb through her, she’s suddenly, deeply grateful. (QD 306)

Chitra Banerjee explores the myth of widowhood also. The society, which is defined by men, deplores the condition of women when they become widows. Widowhood is the biggest curse faced by any Indian woman. Sumita of “Clothes” has been a traditional virtuous wife and daughter-in-law. But when her husband dies, Sumita’s in-laws want to take her back to India. Sumita trembles with fearful anticipation of what lay before her days as a widow, neglected, pitied, denigrated and insulted. Instead of submissively accepting her fate as a widow, instead of returning to India with her parents-in-law, Sumita decides to follow her dream. Looking at herself in the mirror, Sumita is determined not to wear the white sari of widowhood, not to become one of the widows who live their lives submissively. She describes these widows as “Doves with cut-off wings” (AM 33).

Society keeps checks on a widow and snatches her right to wear new clothes once she has lost her husband. A widow is put to all sorts of criticism once the shadow of her husband is off her head. After the funeral Gouri would not allow herself to break down as Nalini did. When others try to get her weeping, to let her sorrow out of heart, she said, “I don’t have the luxury. I made a promise and I must use all my energies to keep it” (SMH 48). As a reputed family of Bengal, she follows traditional women’s ways like holding a bunch of keys tied to her cream-coloured toshar silk saree and her pearl broach on the shoulder. Her generous, calm, and calculating personality reminds one of the good splendour, grace and intelligence often attached to the ‘bou thakurans’ or the leading ladies of the zamindar households.
Nalini and Gouri Ma accept the challenge fully. But Pishi is forced to sit in the back of the hall on feast days because widows must not take part in the auspicious occasion, according to the orthodox and traditional system. Both Sudha and Anju, being educated, oppose these things. Being a childless widow, Pishi endures stoically the lack of status ancient Hindu tradition prescribes for widows. Like Pishi even adolescent women are mutilated or marred by shaving off their heads and wearing of ‘austere white.’ She says, “I hate Pishi when she puts on her patient smile and sits in the back of the hall on feast days, not participating, because widows mustn’t” (SMH 23).

Chitra Banerjee attempts to express the newfound identity of immigrant women who struggle to survive in an alien land. The novels reveal the female experience of women who are self – actualising. The quest for the definition of self and search for identity are the main features of Indian immigrant women who are caught in the flux of tradition and modernity. It is this search for light, for joy and satisfaction that the protagonists struggle. It is evident that she has been able to project the confrontation of a multi-racial society in which characters like Anju, Lalita, Preeti, Sumita, Asha and the nameless heroine of “The Word Love” are striving for their own existence, survival and freedom.

The acceptance by the Indian women of second class citizenship in America should not be construed as an acknowledgement of her cultural inferiority to the western counterparts; on the contrary, such a status has provided them a condition for a critique of the West and a scope for self-emancipation. Chitra Banerjee has inscribed herself into history through her writing, a discourse that has brought to light the dialectical forces of encounter between cultures, between tradition and modernity.
Moving away from the centre is one way of accepting modernity without its central rigid concepts. In a way, this is an idealisation of the borders, in place of the centre. Of course, Chitra Banerjee creates centre in the borders, as the postmodernists would do. Sudha and Anju leave their respective countries in search of their dreams but only in vain: “the very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting” (LC 63).

The immigrations and transformation have behind them a sense of revolt against the traditional systems and the old-world cultures. Ethnicity, to link up with modernity, is seen not merely as a group identity or a cultural device for the promotion of the group interest but as intertwined with modernity itself, or, inversely, what ‘triggers the ethnic in the modern.’ This old world dutifulness is traditionally Indian and is rejected in favour of a life of adventure and happiness promised by America. Lata Mani comments,

The equation of scripture, law and tradition, and the representation of women as tradition produced a specific matrix of constraints within which the question of sati was debated. This grid was fashioned out of the requirements of an expanding colonial power in need of systematic and unambiguous modes of governance, of law, for instance, and out of a particular view of Indian society. These twin features make intelligible the nature and scope of arguments about sati and the marginality of women to a discourse ostensibly about them. (123)

Another area that needs attention relates to the ways in which tradition is implicated in the modern or how modernity is experienced in traditional terms and how tradition privileges certain practices of the modern in its intersection with it. Modernity may itself be translated into already existing cultural significance. It is
important to recognize the plurality of intentions in which modernity is used, understood and even debunked. Hence the question of tradition with modernity or modernity with tradition is best understood when a return to history is made by revisiting particular events, plotting its social, economic and political configurations and coming to terms with the way history is interpreted in different conditions.

Chitra Banerjee’s protagonists aspire to adapt to their newfound world easily. Unlike the female characters of the older generation the women of younger generation, are firmly rooted in tradition and are ready to break the bounds set by patriarchy to experience what has so far been restricted in their life. They try to resolve the psychological conflict that is accompanied with the new situation. Chitra Banerjee vividly presents the dilemmas of Indian women in traditional society. Her women characters represent the sentiments of women within and without the traditional bounds. In Nation and Narration, Homi Bhabha writes about the moment when discourses of nationhood re-write themselves in the diaspora:

history may be half-made because it is in the process of being made; and the image of cultural authority may be ambivalent because it is caught, uncertainly, in the act of ‘composing’ its powerful image . . . The marginal or ‘minority’ is not the space of a celebratory, or utopian, self-marginalization. It is a much more substantial intervention into those justifications of modernity – progress, homogeneity, cultural organicism, the deep nation, the long past – that rationalize the authoritarian, ‘normalizing’ tendencies within cultures in the name of the national interest or the ethnic prerogative. (3-4)

Asha’s husband Mahesh left the family for the sake of Jessica, an assistant in his office. For him this modern life is more important than his teenage boy Dinesh and
his wife. They apply for divorce. In any encounter involving the ‘east’ and the ‘west,’
selfhood and nationhood are problematized. Defined against the external threat of
‘westernization,’ the woman’s body, in a foreign land, becomes inflated as the
metaphoric co-relates of the nation.

The images used in *The Mistresses of Spices* are harsh and ugly. The male
universe is full of the ‘odour of hate.’ The island itself is a world where men are
excluded and where, as a result, there is neither hate nor fear: “We had known it
would be hard to leave this island of women where on our skin the warm rain fell like
pomegranate seeds, where we woke to birdcall and slept to the First Mother’s singing,
where we swam naked without shame in lakes of blue lotus. To exchange it for the
human world whose harshness we remembered. But this?” (MS 54)

It is explicitly stated that it is an ‘island of women.’ Ironically the phrase
‘human world’ is contrasted, not with a supernatural world, but with the ‘island of
women.’ The exchange for the island of women is the human world. This indicates
that though the world is inhabited by both halves of humanity, it is actually a male
world. However, the female universe is also significant. It is cut off from the male
universe and the only way in which contact between the two worlds can be
established is when the mistresses of their own volition reach out to the other world.

When Tilo decides to give up the divine and restrict herself only to the human,
she takes another name – Maya, a name with profound mythological and
philosophical associations. Maya, in Hindu philosophy is feminine and is the
principle behind the entire material universe. The material universe is considered an
illusion. When Tilo assumes the name Maya, she once again reasserts her earthly and
feminine character. Tilo’s friends are serpents. All her mythic knowledge has been
imparted to her by serpents. The serpent is usually “Mother of All Monsters” and is therefore a symbol of fertility. It is also a symbol of the feminine.

In *Sister of My Heart*, Chitra Banerjee rejects conventional myths and creates new ones. The first book in the novel is titled *The Princess in the Palace of Snakes*. In this part both the protagonists attempt to conform to the traditional feminine roles allocated by the male hegemony. This is symbolized by the traditional fairy tale of the princess in the palace of snakes waiting for her Prince Charming to rescue her. The second book titled *The Queen of Swords*, is not a traditional fairy tale. In *Queen of Dreams* she has drawn profusely from Indian folk tales, myths and fairy tales like talking serpents, Nehar and Tunga-dhwaja which never fail to inculcate the virtues of Indian soil. This new myth symbolizes the new feminine world that Chitra Banerjee envisages. It is a world across the rainbow (ironically a conventional symbol of hope) where women rescue other women and do not wait helplessly for the men.

Since women in traditional societies are more suppressed than in western societies, colonialism has brought a rapid socio-economic change in women along with their emancipation. Women are also encouraged to have new education during and after the colonial period. As in “Affair,” the women frequently leave their marriages or relationships in order to re-conceptualize their notions of self and home. “The Disappearance” is a complex portrayal of a woman’s quest for identity written from the perspective of her husband, neither of whom has been named in the story. The man is completely confounded when his wife ‘disappears’; he announces a hefty reward and cherishes her memories because it never occurs to him that she may have deserted him. In traditional society women are not expected to have the power to leave the house. In fact being rebellious is not feminine. “The epoch in which we are living is still, from the feminist point of view, a period of transition” (*SS* 415).
In the traditional tyrannical household a woman is not permitted to leave the husband’s house without permission. Geeta of *The Mistress of Spices* is forced to leave her home. Leaving home, for a bright lad, is an essential part of the process of self-assertion, a necessary step on the way of self-reliance. To escape from home is to win release from the place that stunts one’s growth, stifles one’s breath, distorts one’s values and ruins one’s opportunities. She says, “I’m leaving. And never coming back . . . I’m going to move in with Juan then. He’s been asking me for a long time. I said no, thinking of you guys all this time, but now I will” (*MS* 90). The female protagonist of “The Disappearance” leaves her home with all her jewellery. Sudha leaves Sanyal’s house with her jewellery presented to her by Rani Ma during her marriage. To set up her own economic unit, re-formulate her own identity she makes use of this: “I have five hundred rupees. I took them from Ramesh’s desk drawer. And all my jewellery that wasn’t in the safe. Just in case” (*SMH* 261). Abha in “Affair” leaves the stifling environment:

I’ll take one of the dusty suitcases from under the bed. Half the money from the savings account. My wedding jewelery. My car. That would keep me for a few months. There were cheap motels in the little towns on the peninsula, Redwood City, San Mateo. Rooming houses. And even in the city, in the not-so-good areas. Some of them run by Indians. I’d seen them on a news show a while back. Maybe someone would let me stay for a lower rate if I did some work. Filing, accounts, even cleaning rooms. (*AM* 270-71)

In “The Bats,” the journey of the wife and the child from a suffocating environment in an urban setting to a natural and rural backdrop symbolizes the flight
from the inadequacies of modern life, which is but a fleeting essence, to the recesses of the past heritage in quest of a solid foothold.

After a long and painful internal struggle, Ahuja’s wife finds the courage to leave her brutal husband and ascertain an independent existence. Lalita says, “I packed a bag, took my passport, some wedding jewellery that was in the house, whatever money I could find. I didn’t want to touch anything of his, but I knew I’d have to survive” (MS 271).

Tilo is not permitted to leave the store. Within the male universe the store is an isolated female world by itself. Men may enter it but they do not belong there. It is filled with spices that are associated with the kitchen, the traditional female domain, “freedom and equality are marked by a ‘right to difference in equality’ ” (LC xvii). The dream–tellers are forbidden to get married and have children, their community defies the traditional family structure. It is evident that Chitra Banerjee does not step out of the sphere of conventional feminine territory. It is only beyond the male world that the protagonists find safety. She attempts only to recreate the female world out of existing stereotypes. Meena in “Affair” thinks about the society just before leaving the house: “Sometimes I still feel so guilty. I think of what my parents will say, and Srikant’s mother, when they find out. Selfish, they’ll call me. Immoral. A bad woman. I have to keep telling myself I’m not that. It’s not wrong to want to be happy, is it? To want more out of life than fulfilling duties you took on before you knew what they truly meant?” (AM 270)

The wifehood Rakhi’s mother witnesses as a girl appears gruesome to her: “Wives worked endlessly and without hope of praise, though if things went wrong, there was always plenty of blame. The invisible life of wives, the one carried out in darkness in closed bedrooms . . .” (QD 164). Although the community of dream-
tellers partially provides the talented orphan with the security she needs to construct herself as a dream–teller, it does not fully substitute for a real family.

The dilemma faced by the women in Chitra Banerjee’s novels is similar to the postmodern women. All the women protagonists stuck between the crossroads of tradition and modernity, are unable to find solace in either. When certain aspects of the conventional pattern of life become morbid and tormenting, one wishes to tear apart all boundaries and escape into a world where everything is replete with novelty, glory and adventure. However, this allurement of a magical world proves illusory as soon as one is confronted with its bitter, not-so-open facts. The new kind of claustrophobia which comes with this new world shatters all dreams to smithereens and convinces one that what one has been visualizing so long was no concrete form but only an insubstantial mirage.

Traditional Indian women took pride in service and self-sacrifice. They had set models like Sita and Anasuya whom they tried to emulate. It should also be remembered that the Indian woman, who was eulogized as an embodiment of sacrifice and suffering, a monument of patience and devotion, a self-less bestower of love and affection was given an enviable position of respect in the Vedic age. Manu the earliest of law-givers stated in III, 56: “Where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards” (qtd. in Marvelly).

In the novels Sister of My Heart and The Vine of Desire, Chitra Banerjee explores the predicament of women settled in America. The extolling of wifehood is uncompromising and the mothers are highly victimized. Though they themselves perpetuate it to the next generation, they also aid in helping them to escape.
The Chatterjee girls live in a patriarchal home in which there is absolutely no male control. The only male alive in the family is disguised as Singhji, the driver who exerts no authority over the household. A restrictive boundary for the women is recreated into a female universe just like Tilo’s store in *The Mistresses of Spices*. The Chatterjee women are completely transformed and are made aware that modern India is undergoing a rapid social change from within and from outside. Towards the end of the novel they emerge as a unifying factor of tradition and modernity:

The mothers have joined book societies and knitting classes. They go for walks around Victoria Memorial. They volunteer at Mother Teresa’s Shishu Bhavan and – chaperoned by an insistent Singhji – attend all-night classical music concerts from which they return, cheeks flushed with the early morning cold, humming a song in the bhairav raga. They take day trips to Dakshineswar and bathe in the Ganges. After they have prayed at the temple, they eat singaras on the river steps while the afternoon sun dries their hair. Already they are talking of a trip to Darjeeling in the summer. (*SMH* 296)

Unlike the mother in “The Bats” Sudha comes out of the shelter and proves that married women need not live under the shelter of her husband, no matter what the condition is. The metaphor of the house exists as a restricting force which can give neither peace nor joy. Hence they start their life with a new vigour, as “The epigraph” from the *Dhammapada* in Deshpande’s *The Dark Holds No Terrors* reads: “You are your own refuge; / there is no other refuge. / This refuge is hard to achieve.”

The epigraph strongly suggests that a woman should take life as it comes and try to find solace and happiness with whatever is available. Escapism is no solution; a permanent solution has to come from within. Turning her back on the problems that
fall her way is no solution to the problem. She should not meekly surrender but make the best she can and achieve happiness in the little joys available to her in her lifetime. By facing hardships and overcoming obstacles that come in the way of achieving happiness a woman would derive her soul force. Chitra Banerjee’s women take centre-stage by exerting their industry, ingenuity and resilience. Sudha stands for self-assertion, though continually circumscribed by the imperatives of the male universe. She is attached to tradition but is strong, independent and free-spirited.

By adopting American ways, Rakhi moves towards success and stability in life, although temporarily she suffers a setback due to doubts about her sense of belonging and identity. Her mother, Mrs. Gupta, on the other hand, chooses to adapt, to keep herself Indian to the core on the American soil, to merely adjust to the American ways for a cause – a cause that is important to her, a high cost that she is willing to pay in order to preserve the power of dreams that enable her to reach out to people around her, whether Indian or not, and help people with their problems. Her stance of adapting, though it breaks her normal home – helps her become the channel of building up the homes of all and sundry.

The novelist highlights India’s long and troublesome journey from tradition to modernity. The protagonists are in search of their true image, tossing between the traditional values they have absorbed from childhood and the new values of their education and their association with the west.

‘Tradition,’ in these novels emerges as the cynical legitimizing ideology of all forms of reactionary social forces, including the family, whereas the much – maligned ‘modernity’ – of science, convenience products, women’s rights, individualism – is the space of women’s liberation and self-expression. But it is not always the western woman who is the representative of this ‘modernity.’
As a sensitive writer who is able to perceive the tangible forces of history and the complexities of the contemporary society, Chitra Banerjee is fully cognizant of the inevitable demands of modernization. She firmly believes that change is inevitable and mandatory. She seems to suggest that while India should be proud of her long-cherished spiritual, social and cultural tradition it should not hesitate to recognize and accept the positive aspects of modernization.

Chitra Banerjee takes the opportunity to re-evaluate her homeland’s culture, stressing on the status of women and unfolding its ancient myths and ethnicities. The widowed mother of “The Disappearance” shuts up her small flat back in India and is delighted to come and keep the house for her son and grandson in the new country. The old sanskars shake her new faith and she is struggling to come out of the shackles of such old sanskars: “[The boy] he had started calling her ‘Ma,’ just like his father did” (AM 175). Thus the synthesis between tradition and modernity has given her a true perspective where she can see traditional Indian and contemporary American way of life. The traditional land insists that they must remain hangers on their husband’s shoulder and the new world shows how to uphold individual’s liberty and privacy.

The story “Doors” gives a picture of the character Preeti who faces a dilemma – ‘to be’ or ‘not to be’ an Indian in America. As Deepika Bahri says in her article “Postcolonial Studies,” Preeti “demonstrates her new found decisiveness and resistance to her husband’s view of a traditional Indian wife.”

The protagonists of Chitra Banerjee realize it is possible to negotiate and question those very terms and conditions which are held responsible for their subordination. Crucial choices reflect a mature perspective. Strategies for survival are evolved instead of wallowing in self-pity; new insights add new meaning to their battered lives. In keeping with modern city life most of the characters are commercial
in their relationship with one another. Like the novelist herself making a bold deviation from tradition in her approach to the fictionalisation of artistic ideas and ideals.

The message which the writer conveys is that a woman’s emancipation lies neither in suffering quietly like a fatalist nor in repudiating all claims of the family and society like a rebel. She must draw upon her inner strength, which her education and knowledge have given her and bring about reconciliation between tradition and modernity without losing her own identity. Most of the times the protagonists revolt against the exploitations of men and sometimes they adjust with men. They know that whatever the attitude of the society be, the ‘new woman’ has become conscious of her destination, viz. to liberate herself from the clutches of unjust taboos and customs forced on her by male dominance.

The emerging new empowered woman is a product of the inevitable transformation taking place in the society as the country marches ahead to catch up with the rest of the world. The woman’s quest for an identity of her own is also not just an imitation of the west. Her struggle needs some support structures of the family to enable women to survive. If the spirit of fire burning within her convinces her, nothing can stop her in her upward and onward journey.

Anju’s is a meaningful life— a life with hope, with passion, with future perspective. In the contemporary Indian milieu, she appears modern, educated, sophisticated, intelligent, bold and independent; and copes with the problems of the changing social order. She finally perceives that one should stick on to one’s life-giving tradition adapting oneself to the positive aspects of modernity. One has to be bold and brave enough to meet the challenges of life. Then the modern woman could achieve what her predecessors a few generations ago could not.
The novels reveal Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s instinctive ability to articulate the feelings of the contemporary, urban, educated upper middle-class women who are caught in the transitional period between tradition and modernity. She suggests that a balance between the conventional, pre-set role of women and the contemporary issues has to be struck to pave way for the emergence of the new woman. The emerging woman’s search for self-hood in the post-colonial third world is a continuous process.

The debate between tradition and modernity which has for long formed the main theme of writers goes on unabated. In a country like India this clash is an ineluctable part of reality and will continue to be so for long. In the socially structured relationships, the new woman stands at the crossroads of tradition and modernity which pull her in opposite directions whereby as Riso says “very serious intrapsychic conflicts occur, and the person attempts to remake reality rather than succumb to anxiety” (467). By breaking the traditional, social and moral constrictions, she will be able to live with a heightened sense of dignity and individuality. And she has miles to go before the goal is reached.