CHAPTER 4

RE-VISIONING AUTONOMY

The novels under study depict women characters that challenge the given structures as well as defined roles of women and re-vision their autonomy with respect to home, marriage, education, rigidity of rituals and laying claim to social and political spaces. Home depicted in the novels is not merely a house governed by the patriarch but also a place where women lay their claim on it as a geographical space where they can exercise their creativity and freedom. The women in the novels demand their personal spaces inside home where they can engage themselves in areas and activities beyond mothers and wives. This striving for geographical space is a major step in the practice of autonomy and thus homes no longer remain a unifying place but a site for contest. The lived reality of the characters cracks the myth of home being a safe refuge for living under all situations by all its members. The sanctity of home, as elucidated in the novels, is tainted by the very inmates who are supposed to safeguard and protect it. Thus, while the members physically find shelter in the home, they continue to suffer psychologically and emotionally in the very house that is their refuge.

In the field of education also, the protagonists make all efforts to do away with the restricted notion of education as a means of procuring good matrimonial prospects. These women cross the threshold and opt for co-education to empower themselves with intellectual pursuits. They choose careers which are considered male-centered and prove their mettle in the hitherto restricted domains. Education, thus, becomes a tool for social mobility and intellectual development, instilling new confidence in a woman, where she can strive for attaining financial independence with her ‘own money’.

Marriage is another crucial space where the protagonists strive to achieve autonomy with respect to one’s own choice and love marriages instead of the arranged matches and also in their preference to remain single in order to serve larger social causes. Various women protagonists take stand in matters of matrimony and choose to decide for themselves even in the midst of a tricky situation related to convincing the family. They resort to their own ways when not treated on equal footing by their counter-parts and do not hesitate to leave the marital home when incompatibility goes beyond the limits of reconciliation. They exercise their rights for custody of their children without
any pangs of remorse, although they do not eulogize marriage and motherhood as the only option left for woman to prove her love and merit. Hence, they do not consider infertility as a sin but just a biological disorder and are able to lead their life independently when divorced due to their inability to produce a child.

The women characters depicted by both the writers struggle to create an identity of their own by opting for activities and duties that go beyond husbands and children. Women like Swarna Lata and Shakuntala in *Difficult Daughters* understand their potential and intellectual acumen to participate in the Gandhi’s struggle for freedom of the nation, arrange conferences and seminars, read research papers. Astha, Pipeelika, Neeraj and Sameera in *A Married Woman* take active interest in the political activities of the times and associate themselves with *Sampradayakta Mukti Manch* and work for communal harmony. Astha paints banners for the *Manch* and joins *Rath Yatra* with Pipeelika. She even delivers a speech in Ayodhya for communal peace and feels empowered. These women also run Non Governmental Organizations which help the needy girls earn while learning job-oriented skills. Nisha, in *Home*, takes a leap forward and enters the business line in the family which was hitherto only a male domain. She proves her entrepreneurial skills and establishes herself as a successful business woman. Nina, in *The Immigrant*, widens her outlook and settles abroad with her dentist husband. Later, on finding him as an incompatible life partner, leaves the marriage and strikes her roots in a completely alien world. Likewise Sidhwa’s women like Jerbanoo in *The Crow Eaters*, Zaitoon and Carol in *The Pakistani Bride*, Lenny’s mother and Godmother in *Ice Candy Man/Cracking India*, Feroza in *An American Brat* and Chuyia, Shakuntala and Kalyani in *Water*, all strive to chart out spaces for themselves in public sphere by sheer dint of their indomitable spirit and function as consciousness raisers for other women in their vicinity.

The woman protagonist Jerbanoo in *The Crow Eaters* exercises her autonomy of thought and action while living in Freddy’s house. She takes control of the servants in the house as well as in the stores. She could easily see through the game-plan of Freddy to set her on fire when she was alone in the house. Zaitoon in *The Pakistani Bride* could gauze her predicament in her marital home when she saw her husband, Sakhi, beating his own mother. She could see that this may be her lot too in future and she decides to leave the marriage once for all. The concept of motherhood could no longer bind her to her marital home and she takes control of her life by deciding to
run away even though she was well aware of the punishment of such an act in the tribal code of honor. Lenny’s mother and Godmother take charge of rehabilitating the destitute women during partition. *Feroza in An American Brat*, seeks a broader view of human ties. She assimilates in the American culture and decides to fight for justice for the Pakistani Muslim women. She is much perturbed over the fundamentalist *Hadood Ordinance* and other Muslim laws which assign a secondary status to its women. Shakuntala in *Water* could challenge the religious dogmas practiced by the priest, Sadanand. She plays a decisive role in helping Kalyani to go for her professed love and secure her from the clutches of Madhumati, the head widow in the *ashram*.

As represented in the various novels, the retrogressive norms of the society tend to link the sexuality of the woman to the concept of community honour and hence any violation or perceived transgression of sexuality in the form of developing one’s own relationships invite terrible consequences from family and community, ranging from inhuman beating to killings in the name of false honour. The women protagonists challenge these outdated notions of honour associated with their body and look respectfully towards their choices exercised in the form of their life partnerships. And in the process, the dominant ideology of culture, which considers women bodies as impure, is challenged by the protagonists in an attempt to tilt it in their own favor. To satisfy their sexual urge, these women characters enter into the tabooed arena of lesbianism and having experienced it, they take recourse to heterosexuality with gained insights. Even in heterosexual relationships, they entertain the choice of forming extra-marital bonds and relish these without feeling guilty about it.

In the process of inching towards autonomy, these female characters undergo immense emotional turmoil, anguish, rejection, alienation and loneliness. They feel suffocated and pressurized by constricting strictures, but at the same time, gasp for breath and feel the instinct for self-preservation. Women in Kapur’s novels continue to retain a deep awareness of being on trial in the midst of an abiding sense of neglect, loneliness and rejection. The novels depict in all subtleties the trauma experienced by the Indian and sub-continental women in choosing to lead a life of their own moving through acquainted territories or forging new un-trodden paths. Challenging existing subjugation and male dominance and consequently making difficult choices for themselves like remaining single, opting out of the loveless marriages, going for divorce and custody rights of the children, entails a very heavy price.
Similarly Sidhwa depicts the inner pulls of love and attachment, family and friendships, religion and culture in a conservative Pakistani society. Her women characters undergo emotional trauma but at the same time chart out their own paths. The protagonists of both the writers challenge and confront the world constructed by men and in the process are ready to face isolation, rejection and loneliness but have a strong desire to live a life of self-worth. The attempt to inch towards autonomy calls for various modes of resistances adopted by the protagonists varying from using silence as a tool to speech as a way of expressing their discontent according to the situation in which these women find themselves. They also use anger as a tool to deal with the dehumanizing situations and take strict decisions, thus becoming agents of change for other women and for marginalized sections of society as well.

Virmati, the protagonist of Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters*, undergoes a difficult journey to fulfill her desires related to leading a meaningful personal and social life. Being the eldest of eleven siblings and four younger sisters waiting to get married, Virmati’s efforts to get higher education are praiseworthy. She constantly protests being tied to duties inside home and draws inspiration to study further from a quotation on the bulletin board in school, which read: “Higher education involved being on one’s own” (*Difficult Daughters*21). Virmati fails in her F.A. because “the struggle to do well in school while doing her duties at home was too much” (*Difficult Daughters* 20). When Virmati complains about getting less time to study, she was scolded by her mother, saying, “Leave your studies if it is going to make you so bad-tempered with your family. You are forgetting what comes first” (*Difficult Daughters* 21). Virmati’s home is a traditionalist home which encourages the education of girls but only up to the extent of improving oneself in domestic duties and increasing their market-value in the matrimonial prospects. Virmati’s cousin Shakuntala however, has dismantled these restricting structures of home and has been successful in creating a space for herself in the public sphere on account of her education. She teaches in a women’s college and is not worried at all about her unmarried status.

Virmati, impressed with her cousin Shakuntala’s notion about marriage, nation and independence, could see that Shakuntala’s “responsibilities went beyond a husband and children” (*Difficult Daughters*17). Virmati would like to follow the path suggested and practiced by Shakuntala: “These people don’t understand Viru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent. Here
we are, fighting for the freedom of the nation, but women are still supposed to marry, and nothing else” ([Difficult Daughters]17). By presenting Shakuntala as an independent career woman with rational mindset, Kapur envisages a bright future where woman can be free from the ‘dependence syndrome’. This is Kapur’s idea of autonomy where, she believes that, women can nurture their potential and exercise it in the direction of larger concerns of the society which alone would enable women to go beyond the restricting boundaries of home and hearth.

Kapur, through the character of Shakuntala, opines that marriage is not the only choice for women and that “it was useless looking for answers inside the home. One had to look outside. To education, freedom, and the bright lights of Lahore colleges.” ([Difficult Daughters]17) Inspired by Shakuntala, Virmati resolves to go to Lahore one day for higher study even if it meant having “to fight her mother who was so sure that her education was practically over” ([Difficult Daughters]19). On account of her hard work, Virmati passed her F.A. and convinced her family to let her join A.S College “the bastion of male learning” ([Difficult Daughters] 45). The writer is confident that “Once she had gained a proper education, she would be on her way to becoming one of the finest flower of womanhood” ([Difficult Daughters] 62).

Kapur envisions greater participation of women in public sphere so as to realise their full potential. At the same time, the writer talks of the time in which Kasturi, Virmati’s mother, lived and who “graduated at the age of 12, to stay at home until married”([Difficult Daughters] 62). Marriage at that time was considered to be the destiny of a girl child who was required to nurture qualities of gentleness, tranquility, beauty and modesty. Girls during those times could not question what was decided for them by the family. Kapur sees inability to read and write as a great drawback for women to lay their claims on husbands by presenting to readers the character of Ganga, Professor Harish’s wife. Ganga is always in awe of her educated husband who was foreign returned and had not been in touch with her for five years as she could not read and write. The writer presents education as a tool of empowerment that is necessary for women to acquire so that they can be intellectual companions in their marital relationship and understand the different responsibilities and rights from their own perspective. Education, Kapur feels, would also equip women to safeguard her interests, be it intellectual, emotional or social, since “education teaches us to think for ourselves” ([Difficult Daughters]102). Kapur opines that, “the traditions that refuse
to entertain doubt, or remains impervious to new thoughts and ideas, become a prison rather than a sustaining life force” (*Difficult Daughters* 102).

Another area where Kapur’s vision of female autonomy is presented in *Difficult Daughters* is marriage. Virmati is engaged to be married to a canal engineer Inderjeet, and dreams of her fiancé, which is a shift in attitude from the women of earlier generations who shy away from expressing any passion before marriage. She looks for that love in the formal letter received from her fiancé. Kapur writes, “She searched the words, but could find no sense that she was important to him, no impatience to be united with her” (*Difficult Daughters* 56). Unable to find love in a match arranged by her family, Virmati decides to follow her heart which she had given to Prof. Harish, who lived as their tenant and taught English in her college. Virmati’s dilemma to accept the professed love of the married professor is visible in the words, “Her soul revolted and her suffering increased” as she was to decide between, “early marriage and no education? No Professor and no love?” (*Difficult Daughters* 54) Kapur’s protagonist strives to taste the fruit of love but in the process undergoes much pain and emotional upheaval. Ultimately she resolves to follow her heart. She knew, “she had fallen against the grain, and whatever might be the consequences, she must continue her course” (*Difficult Daughters* 57).

Professor’s indecisiveness, however, forces her to drown herself in the canal, though she is ultimately rescued. Virmati feels ashamed for the disgrace she had brought to the family name yet she adopts the mode of silence in resisting to get married. Her mother Kasturi is greatly agitated and even beats Virmati for resisting the arranged marriage. She, however, confronts her mother saying, “What is wrong with not wanting to marry?” (*Difficult Daughters* 58) Thus Kapur presents a choice before her women protagonists for remaining single or opting for own choice marriage. Virmati later tells the professor through her letters that, “if I was to be a rubber doll for others to move as they willed, then I do not want to live” (*Difficult Daughters* 92). This statement shows Virmati’s desire for autonomy with respect to a very important aspect of her life, in spite of the fact that she had caused irreparable loss to the family’s dignity. Kasturi accompanies Virmati to Lahore as Virmati was stubborn on continuing with her learning through which she wanted to comprehend her own self: “I am going to be on my own, this is a new beginning” (*Difficult Daughters*112). She laments the fact of her family laying so much emphasis on marriage when other
daughters were opting for serving the nation. She tells her room-mate Swarna that, "Nobody wanted anything for me except husband" (Difficult Daughters 110).

The writer advocates that if women are to achieve their autonomy, they should be very clear of their goals in life, since "marriage is not the only thing in life" (Difficult Daughters 151). She believes that when females can handle responsibilities within home, they are equally capable of handling them in social sphere and that "society will be better off if its females were effective and capable" (Difficult Daughters 163). She is optimistic that they can strike a balance between home and public sphere by following the path of "Adjust, compromise, adapt" (Difficult Daughters 256).

The writer also introduces a woman’s desire to exercise control over her body and sexuality. Kasturi, who is consistently giving birth to children year after year, is ultimately exhausted. When she conceives for the eleventh time, she wishes for a miracle to take place and hopes for a miscarriage. Kasturi’s wish for "a miracle of a miscarriage" (Difficult Daughters 7) shows a woman’s secret desire to have control over her body. At the same time, there is a shift in the attitude of Kapur’s woman from Kasturi to Virmati and then Ida. Virmati is demanding in her relationships with Professor, though she has a traditional concept of chastity of women and feels that she belongs only to him, no matter what he does, "She was his for life, whether he ever married or not. Her body was marked by him, she could never look elsewhere, never entertain another choice" (Difficult Daughters 177). Ida, on the other hand, belonging to a more forward looking generation, decides to go for divorce when she was forced to abort her child by her husband. This is a shift from passivity to action. Kapur wants her women to take decisions, face the consequences and tackle their problem on their own if they are to achieve independence and autonomy in their lives.

Asta, the protagonist of the novel A Married Woman, and the only daughter of her parents, is brought up as befits a girl in a traditional set up. Astha’s parents are concerned about the overall development of their only child which marks a shift in the attitude of the parents. Though Sita, Astha’s mother, still believes that a girl’s education is limited to equipping herself for better matrimonial prospects, her father is sure that her daughter’s future lay in education, “Her daughter’s future lay in her own hands, and these hands were to be strengthened by the number of books that passed through them” (A Married Woman 2). Her mother has strong faith in the observation of rituals in routine matters, but Astha resents following the rituals and when her
mother asks her to pray before the images of gods, she meekly obeys but instead of praying keeps imagining of the future husband. Thus she overtly seems to obey her mother but acquires a mental space for herself and relishes it.

Asthा secretly entertains friendship first with a boy of her choice and gets infuriated at her mother’s undue interference: “How dare her mother interfere in her friendship?” (A Married Woman 15). She shared an emotional bond with Rohan and spent time with him. Her parents, consequently, tighten the surveillance over her and provide her with religious texts to inculcate moral values. Astha resented reading these books and locked her up in the bathroom to give went to her heavy heart when Rohan refused to carry the relationship forward and went abroad for further studies. She wanted to be, “free from voices, free from everything except the terrible things she was feeling, because…Rohan had lied to her” (A Married Woman 31). Marriage proposals that came in the way of her parents were discussed in the house and Astha refused to meet the boys until finally she agreed to meet one, but here too she refuses to be displayed like an object and stresses on talking to the man on matters related to marriage.

Asthа had great potential in painting and reading. She also exhibited her talent in writing short poems. The writer strongly believes that women should educate themselves enough to avail with a job opportunity and “with good job comes independence” (A Married Woman 4). She also believes that with job comes the autonomy of spending money without the permission of the parents or the husband. Astha, after her marriage to Hemant, and fulfilling her task of procreation, takes up a job of school teacher to fill her days with meaning, since she was left with lot of free time and she refused to spend it just in waiting for Hemant. Kapur opines that job should not be opted just as a way of avoiding quarrels at home but for fulfillment of the self. Astha was much contented as, “her salary meant she didn’t have to ask Hemant for every little rupee she spent” (A Married Woman 72). This fruitful engagement gave Astha much needed confidence and, “she changed from being a woman who only wanted love, to a woman who valued independence” (A Married Woman 72). She now had the opportunity to interact with ‘minds instead of needs’ and received recognition for one-tenth of work that she did at home. The message is clear that women need to transcend the boundaries of home in order to realise their full capabilities. Kapur opines that, “to do something you believe in makes other things a
little easier” (A Married Woman133), and having “something of your own makes you strong” (A Married Woman 176). The writer lays emphasis on women to acquire skills to increase their earning potential, just as Astha does by painting which fetched her handsome amount and helped her gain social recognition too. When Hemant asks Astha to quit her job, she thinks about the value of job not in monetary terms only but to her it, “represented the security, not perhaps of money, but of her own life, of a place where she could be herself” (A Married Woman149). The financial security for women protagonists is a way of arriving at a stage in life where they can independently take command of their needs, desires and, above all, create some meaning and purpose in their lives.

Asthा, on account of her marital dissatisfaction, suffers from a sense of incompleteness, repression and anguish. After the birth of a girl child Anuradha, Hemant turned from an all American father to an Indian who wanted to have a son. Ashta’s mother-in-law arranged worships to ensure the birth of a grandson. Astha is alarmed at these rituals and tells the family that, “puja may not make a difference, it may still be another granddaughter” (A Married Woman 67). She exercises her autonomy of spirit and with words of endearment whispers to the unborn baby “are you a boy or a girl? I’ll love you no matter what” (A Married Woman 68). Astha gave birth to a baby boy and family was overwhelmed “in the birth of her grandson, carrier of the line, the seed, the name to respond with” (A Married Woman 68). Astha too felt somewhere that, “she had partaken the archetypal experiences marked out for the female race” (A Married Woman 69). Through Astha’s feelings, the writer hints at the social pressures that a woman has to undergo in her married life and her obligation to give birth to a male-child. The writer is sad at how family and society prefer male children and those very sons go and settle abroad to fulfill their own aspirations as does Pipeelika’s brother Ajay. The writer notes, “What’s the use of having a son and brother if all he does is write patronizing letters from States” (A Married Woman123). She feels that girls are “made to feel worthless” (A Married Woman125), in spite of their contribution in raising the family, so they need to move out of the home to gain recognition for their potential and at the same time gain economic independence.

Asthा’s demand for personal space for making paintings inside the home for the cause of communal harmony was sneered by Hemant and she, “vowed bitterly to earn enough money to rent her own studio one day” (A Married Woman157). This streak
of confidence is indicative of her mental strength and her ability to decide the future course of actions in her life. Astha, though, wanted recognition from her husband for the work she was doing for *Sampradayakta Mukti Manch* but she knew, “this was impossible, and that people who expect the impossible are setting themselves up for misery, and Astha would rather die than be such a woman” (*A Married Woman* 159). This resolve establishes her desire for exercising autonomy in husband wife relationships. She participates in *Rath Yatra* organized by the *Manch* which has a symbolic significance as it connotes a journey of a woman from private (home) to public sphere. Kapur writes, “It was a journey to political prominence” (*A Married Woman* 158). When the family had gone to Goa for holidaying, Astha asserts her right to buy the antic silver box and tells Hemant, “I also earn. Can’t I buy a box if I want, even if it is a little overpriced” (*A Married Woman* 165). Astha resents sacrificing her interest in the name of the family, “the ideal of Indian womanhood, used to trap and jail”, and feels that, “if a marriage is terrible, it is good to leave” (*A Married Woman* 168).

When Astha realizes that ‘A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day’ are the prerequisites of a wife for Hemant, she redefines her sense for home, duty, wifehood and motherhood. The writer considers husband-wife relationship as a “rocky terrain” (*A Married Woman* 170) and hopes that women will find out a respectable way to make marriage a responsibility of both the partners. Autonomy for a woman, writer feels, lies in finding out and realizing ones heart’s desires, just as Astha has decided to go for using her whole energy in painting for a cause that is not only dear to her heart but is beneficial to the whole society. Though Astha is in constant battle between what traditional society expects from her status as wife and her own interests, passions and desires, yet she is able to chart out the journey of her life in her own way. Her demand for her personal space inside the house which she can utilize to pursue her hobbies in painting and writing poems, depict her keen desire for individual meaning in life. Making paintings for the cause of communal harmony was a satisfying act for her as, “it gave her both a platform and focus around which she built her work”, and she felt that the “detour she had taken between home and school had now become the road she travelled” (*A Married Woman* 186).

The autonomy of women protagonists is also reflected in challenging the defined contours of religion and worship. Pipeelika refuses to listen to her mother’s
implorations to do puja-paths and tells her mother, “my father didn’t want his
daughter’s life cluttered with the images of gods, and now I am going to live up to his
legacy” (A Married Woman 122). Similarly Astha resents her mother’s going to
ashram and tells her mother, “I don’t need any religion” (A Married Woman 85) to
survive in this world because, “religion is a choice as much as any other thing” (A
Married Woman 89). The act of Astha and Pipeelika entering into lesbian relationship
is a pointer towards the distance a woman has travelled from being pressurized by
ethics and morality to the conception of one’s own notion of morality. Astha even
feels drawn to Aijaz and when her guilty conscience pricks as she was married, she
tells herself, “What connection did that (her relation with Aijaz) have with her
marriage…suddenly she glimpsed possibilities, suddenly her life seemed less
constricted” (A Married Woman 115). Astha thus challenges the stereotype of
faithfulness in marriage as being the sole responsibility of a woman. Pipeelika’s
choice to marry a Muslim, Aijaz, is also hitting the nail on the head of the conformist
forces who disrepute and discourage inter-caste, inter-faith marriages.

Kapur’s women characters do not succumb to the codes of conduct attached with
sexuality by the male-dominated society and neither have they followed their mothers
who perpetuate patriarchy by their strict surveillance or injections. For a woman,
sexuality is a domain of restriction and repression but Astha does not let her sexuality
become a site of guilt or oppression. She enjoys physical intimacy with Rohan and
“felt something flow inside her” (A Married Woman 24). She longed for the repetition
of his touch all over her body, “all she wanted was for him to start, so that the world
could fall away, and she be lost” (A Married Woman 25). She is ready to flout all
conventions to gratify her body. Even after marriage Astha held her reigns in matters
of sex with Hemant. She didn’t give to his coaxing of reading and looking at sex-
manuals and rejected his idea of wearing sexy clothes (here a teddy) and retorted,
“What do you think I am a whore?” (A Married Woman 44) At the same time, when
she found having sex with Hemant a satisfying act, “she felt a woman of the world,
the world that was covered with the film of her desire, and the fluids of their sex” (A
Married Woman 46). She resents sex as a routine to be performed but wants
emotional fulfillment and as a result chides Hemant for his ‘quickies’. She refuses to
form marital relationship with Hemant when she was tired and in her dreams thinks of
Aijaz as her lover caressing her, but when she is deeply unsettled, she makes the first
move to make love with Hemant. This indicates her control on sexuality in marital relationship. She tells him plainly, “unless I feel close to you I can’t. I’m not a sex object, you have others for that” (A Married Woman 224). The writer is advocating that women need not take things lying down. Astha looks for love as a union of souls, emotions and ideologies than a mere sexual act. Every single assertion of the self ultimately leads to self-control and is a step towards autonomy. Astha forming a lesbian bond with Aijaz’s widow Pipeelika during her work for the cause of communal harmony is a conflict with traditional notion of marriage and it is this experience which enables her to feel the depth of life. She feels that she has used her feminine power and ventured for love in her own way challenging the patriarchal world and overcoming her loneliness in marriage temporarily. She was so satisfied with Pipeelika that sex with Hemant just became a mundane activity and realized that her relationship with Hemant “reflected power than love” (A Married Woman 233). Pipeelika, who realized and claimed her rights on her body and mind, was bold enough to ascertain her autonomous state and declare her lesbian status openly to the society. Both the women resist all social constraints to affirm their independence and their feminine power. Both relished “the pleasure of intimacy that was complete and absolute, expressed through minds as much as bodies” (A Married Woman 231). They refuse to go by social taboos and explore the lesbian relationships to feel a sense of liberation, though it involves lot of emotional upheaval. Astha later develops psychosomatic symptoms of stress and depression and interrogates the social constructs of the marriage institution. She is in constantly divided between the sheltered existence provided by family and tradition and risks involved with one’s choice of love. She ruminates, “We have to struggle for acceptance and the right to love as we feel” (A Married Woman 337).

The writer, through the bond of Astha and Pipeelika, Neerja and Sameera, unravels the world of women where they have strong ties with each other. They are such women characters who try to carve out their own path in order to enter and lay claim to that social space that has hitherto been reserved for males. Astha had to constantly fight for it and negotiate between her duties at home and her commitment to the social cause. Pipeelika and Neerja run an N.G.O. where unprivileged girls are trained to acquire skills, thus contributing for the progress of the trodden masses and helping in the formation of a better society. Women in her novel join hands together, participate
in the march for communal harmony, discuss ideas, travel and live life in a socially meaningful way. They seem to follow what Kapur says about life, “The meaning of life is struggle. There are challenges in all walks of life, how to tackle them is the question, not to run away from home, work, society and obligations”(A Married Woman 88). These women characters work consistently in the direction of making a home that is ‘more clearly’ theirs and understand well that “it usually takes a lifetime to possess a place of one’s own” (A Married Woman181).

Nisha, the protagonist of Manju Kapur’s next novel Home wages resistance against the conservative attitude practiced by her family members in matters related to her upbringing, education, various customs, traditions and modes of worship and religion. She vehemently objects to her mother Sona when the later considers her as a mere helper in the kitchen. She is unwilling to participate in all worships and refuses to observe fast on ‘Karva Chauth’ or other such occasions. She is against the notion that a girl has to learn the art of service and domesticity. Her mother Sona, who realizes the importance of higher education as far as son is concerned, finds it useless for a daughter, since her ultimate destiny is marriage. She says, “God knows what use an education would be to a girl from a trader family, one who was only going to marry and produce children” (Kapur, Home124). Sona believes that a daughter’s “real education is in the kitchen” (Home134). On Nisha’s insistence for higher studies, she is admitted to an all girls college but the family firmly believed that, “higher studies were just a time pass…working was out of question” (Home141). Nisha performed well in studies but at the knowledge of her involvement with a boy called Suresh, she was restricted inside the house and was just allowed to sit for her exams accompanied by Raju, her brother. Nisha’s attempt to educate herself in such stifling family environment displays her will power in exercising her autonomy with regard to learning and acquiring required skills to face the fast changing world in her own developed way.

Nisha’s insistence on love marriage with a boy from a different caste in a traditional family is an instance of exercising her choice in the matters related to her heart. She challenges her family when they tried to dissuade her to marry a low-caste boy with poor background and says, “who cares for caste these days?” what you really want me is to sell in the market?” (Home199). She was slapped by her mother for such daring but Nisha insisted, “Either I marry him or nobody” (Home 200). When finally Suresh
backed out with Nisha in the presence of her family members, she was broken and firmly resolved not to bend under family’s pressure to marry elsewhere. She discussed her modern outlook with her aunt Rupa and told her, “Do we live in the village? If we do, why not throw me down a well and be done with it.” (Home 206)

After her failed love affair, Nisha refuses to be presented to suitors and expresses her desire to go for a fashion designing course instead, but was denied permission by her mother and other family members who feel that her marriage and subsequent settlement in life is more important than anything else. Nisha developed itchy patches on the skin because of the stress she underwent in the unsuccessful love relationship and the family’s interventions. Her eczema was a further cause of concern for the family. On account of Nisha being a manglik, it became difficult for the family to find a suitable manglik match and it was decided to accept a marriage proposal for her younger brother Raju instead. Nisha registered her protest by not taking any interest in the ceremonies or later in his marital life. When Sona asks Nisha to go out for outings with Raju and Pooja, she protests, “I refuse to go with them. They don’t want me.” (Home 261). Nisha wants to occupy her time with something meaningful and she suggests helping Rupa aunty with her pickle business but her mother objects saying, “when you marry, you can do anything your husband permits” (Home 266). While at home, Nisha is in constant conflict with her sister-in-law Pooja and her mother and wants to leave her home since she feels that, “There is nothing for me here” (Home 281). It is then that she convinces her father to allow her to join school as a teacher as a mere pass time since the family does not approve of working women. Nisha finally creates her own social space in a family and society where, “any prospect of work was equivalent to going to the moon” (Home141).

At job she experienced the pleasure of being with colleagues whose interactions were purely academic and professional and had nothing to do with her personal problems. Nisha felt that this social space gave her a place to breathe freely from the strictures of home and customs. Later when she found that the school routine only occupied her till noon, she wanted, ‘something more, more, more’ to fill her time and wished to be as busy as the men of the house. She felt, “she needed an equally absorbing occupation. There must be other things in the world” (Home 277). This dilemma is resolved when one of her colleagues in school displayed the work done by her sister in suits which immediately ignites in Nisha the idea of doing business in shalwar suits. She suddenly
imagined herself “the maker and seller of suits. She had the background, she had the resource, and it would be far more satisfying than teaching nursery children” (Home 284). She convinces her father to give her the chance to prove herself and begins with a boutique called ‘Nisha’s Creation’, very symbolic of the inner fire of doing something of her own. Now Nisha was the employer of six men, including the errand boy. She also determined that, “her business was not to be run standing on the shoulders of others” (Home 292). Soon Nisha’s suits were in great demand, because of the personal attention she paid to each and every task. She managed all her work, from purchasing of the raw materials and tagging the price to selling and keeping accounts, with perfection. Soon Nisha returned the money invested by her father and now her “spirits rose and felt with the levels of the profit” (Home 293). Everyone including her father could notice that, “she was more intelligent, methodical and independent than Raju” (Home 295). But he contemplated, “it was his duty to see that she married. Her fulfillment lay there, no matter how successful her business was” (Home 295).

At the same time, itchy patches on her skin continued to torment her until with the passage of time and self healing, she finally acquiesced to the match the family wanted. She knew her unmarried status would be a cause for ‘secret speculations’ in her social circle. When finally her family decided for Arvind, a middle-aged widower, she told them she would like to talk to the boy as, “she too had something to say to the groom” (Home 298). At her mother’s warning that she need not say much, she retorts, “If I am going to marry him, I should be able to say what I like” (Home 299). Nisha unhesitatingly puts forward her condition of continuing with her business even after marriage which is accepted but the fact that she establishes herself as an entrepreneur and exhibits her potential in men’s sphere clearly demonstrates her independent ways of thought and action. Following her footsteps, Nisha’s sister-in-law Pooja too enters the business set up by Nisha when Nisha had to transfer it on account of being in the family way after her marriage to Arvind, thus breaking the conventional thinking that business arena is only for males and initiating a new trend of women entrepreneurship in the family.

Nina, the protagonist of the novel The Immigrant is a thirty years old woman who teaches in a reputed college in Delhi and lives in a single room apartment with her widowed mother. Her unmarried status is a cause of anxiety for the mother and she
visits temples, observes fasts and consults the astrologers for her daughter’s marriage. Like earlier women protagonists, Nina too has no faith in such rituals and refuses to see the astrologer when appealed by her mother. She is fed up with the topic of marriage as the only discussion point between the two and ignores her mother’s request to search for grooms in the newspaper advertisements. When Ananda, a dentist settled in Canada, is suggested as her future husband, Nina discusses the whole issue with her friend Zenobia and both decide not to rush for the decision as they need to assess the pros and cons of the situation. Nina is reluctant to leave her job, friends and mother and get settled in Canada. Nina’s careful choice in matters related to her marriage points towards the autonomy she exercises in her parental home. She does not accept the proposal meekly in the traditionalist stance and is in great conflict with herself with regard to the decision to marry an NRI, but finally resolves to go ahead with it.

On the suggestion by Ananda that he would like to cover the whole expenses on marriage, Nina, as a self-respecting girl, refuses to agree to it and applies for the loan from college Provident Fund. Their decision to go for a court-marriage further establishes defiance against traditional marriage with glamour and glitter. Nina had to wait for three months for her visa before she landed up in Canada to enjoy the comforts that the Canadian home provided. However, she soon became discontented with her position since “she could gauze the depths to which a former academician had fallen” (The Immigrant 125) in being an immigrant wife. With no family to look up to, Nina was in conflict: “was it always going to be like this, just her and Ananda?” (The Immigrant 130) and the visit to Ananda’s uncle’s place made Nina realize the insignificance of relatives in Canada. She decided ‘she would find her feet soon, then there would not be this useless hankering after relatives’ (The Immigrant 135). Nina and Ananda remain in conflict with each other on the issue of a child. Ananda tells her to settle first but Nina felt, ‘that was exactly she wanted a child, to settle down, to give her days focus in this new country’ (The Immigrant 167). Her suggestion to him to see a doctor for his sexual inadequacy was perceived as a threat to his manhood. Both are in conflict on the issue of treatment as Ananda felt that their personal happiness was more important than the child.

Nina’s dissatisfaction in the marital relationship begins to grow and acquire “a state of permanent sexual frustration” (The Immigrant 178). She is greatly aggrieved to see
her husband’s indifference as she felt that, “having a husband should not have meant such lonely desperation” (*The Immigrant* 179). Nina feels cheated and now could understand Anand’s reason to travel to home country for marriage, “passing off shoddy goods to the innocent East.” (*The Immigrant* 184) Nina, not finding marriage a suitable anchor in a foreign land, is in conflict with herself as to whether to continue in the same restless manner or, “should she return home, announcing her failure to the former world?” (*The Immigrant* 202) Ananda’s secret trip to California for consultation and cure of his problem with the help of a surrogate partner further enhances her conflict because Nina accuses him of secrecy and involvement with a surrogate sex-partner. Nina considers his going alone for sex therapy as a breach of ‘trust and understanding’ in a marital relationship and no longer wishes for a child. She tells Ananda, “I miss home—I miss a job—I miss doing things. I feel like a shadow. What am I but your wife?” (*The Immigrant* 233) Nina’s struggle reveals her heart’s desire for an independent identity. Nina now wanted something constructive to engage her time and decides to join a part time work at Halifax library. This decision in itself is reflective of her autonomous stance with respect to her existence and financial needs.

Nina had been self decisive about her sexual needs right from the beginning when she was a post graduate student, as is evident from her initial involvement with professor Rahul who was fifteen years older than her. She kept this relationship a secret from her mother as, “she was looking for love on her own terms, untainted by conventions and respectability” (*The Immigrant* 6). But when she realized that Rahul is not going to marry her, she refused to succumb to his lust and chose, “loneliness over compromise” (*The Immigrant* 6). Later on in the novel, when she could not find fulfillment with Ananda, she enters in relationship with Anton, her library school mate. She enjoys sex with him on a trip to Ottawa for field work and feels as if she has lived her life to the full and ruminates, “who can feel guilty about living?”(*The Immigrant* 260) The writer intends to opine through the bond that Nina and Anton relish that, “it’s stupid to confine yourself to one person for your whole life…Nobody owns anybody” (*The Immigrant* 258). Assimilated in the culture of the immigrant country, Nina slowly begins to realize that “there were possibilities in the world she could open to. Her body was her own and that included her digestive system and her vagina too” (*The Immigrant* 268). She felt the liberating power of sex when she
understood it as a “purely meeting of the bodies, a healthy give and take” (*The Immigrant* 269), and had no notion of forming permanent bond with Anton. As to her impact on her marital relationship she rationalized, “I am not taking anything away from my husband” (*The Immigrant* 269). Nina later realizes the futility of her relationship with Anton when she discovered that he loved his wife, Lakshmi. She felt cheated as she realized that “she was an ‘unimportant pastime’ and resolved that, “she was not going to let Anton ruin her life” (*The Immigrant* 310). The decisions taken by Nina regarding her sexuality and control on her body are ample proof of her sexual autonomy.

She also joins a group named La Leache League which was solely a woman’s group dealing with the problems of motherhood and barrenness. Later, on the advice of Beth, a co-worker in the library, she joins a co-counseling group of women working on the feminist principles. Ananda objects to her involvement with this group but she tells him categorically, “I need to find my feet in this country. I can’t walk on yours” (*The Immigrant* 213). She understood through her discussions with these women that, “Blame was a power game, a way of making the woman uncertain and confused…a way of silencing” (*The Immigrant* 216). She also comes to understand that, “without awareness, we can be manipulated, and manipulative, exploited as well as exploitative” (*The Immigrant* 220). Such awareness and social interaction makes her more confident of herself with regard to finding her roots in a foreign land and giving her life a purpose by involving herself in ‘new things,’ thereby finding a social space to move around and establish herself in an independent manner.

Shagun, the protagonist of the next novel, *Custody*, is a graduate with tremendous potential for modeling whose professional growth was restricted on account of an early marriage and subsequent family life. She is married to Raman Kaushik, a sales manager in a multinational company, who could not give her enough time and care on account of his extremely busy professional life and Shagun soon becomes “sick and tired of being alone” (Kapur, *Custody* 9). Yet, as she expresses herself during the birth of her second child, she did not want to fill her “empty spaces” (*Custody*17) with children and hated “tied to a child” (*Custody* 18) all the time. Conflict between husband and wife acquires alarming proportions when she wanted to find her feet in the advertising world as Raman, “did not trust the outside world when it came to his wife” (*Custody* 31). Shagun’s loneliness and need for ‘something else’ in her life
leads her to enter into extra-marital relationship with Raman’s boss Ashok Khanna and draw a “curtain between her normal life and secret one” (Custody 27). Raman’s insistence on digging out her secret whereabouts through a detective hurt Shagun beyond limits and she felt, “he swallowed her up, leaving no space to breathe” (Custody 49).

Shagun, in her intimacy with Ashok Khanna, is in conflict with “traditional versus modern values, individual versus society” (Custody 84) and resists his attempt to declare their relationship to the company as both Raman and Ashok worked for the same brand. She tells him: “I have to stay for my children. How will they like it when they grow up and realize that their mother is a divorcee?” (Custody 84) But pondering again over the possibility of life with Ashok, she is unable to resist her heart’s desires, “we have only one life to live and everybody wants to live it the best they can” (Custody 85). Shagun, when entering into extra-marital relationship, had not thought of remarriage but only wished, “a lover would add to her experience” (Custody 86). Things however soon go beyond her control and she is unable to resist this new fulfilling love overpowering her whole self. Shagun was all the more determined to be with Ashok when she came to know that she was followed by detective agency and was ready to repeat it all over again, “even if a camera lurked in every bush outside” (Custody 97). This stance of Shagun reflects her control over the whole episode. Even Raman’s heart attack and illness did not deter her to follow her heart, though she was reproached both by her mother and mother-in-law. She is in a dilemma for a brief while when Mrs. Kaushik, Raman’s mother, confronts her and reminds her of her duties as a wife but it soon melted as she met Ashok and felt that, “this was where she was most herself” (Custody111). She would give anything for a new beginning as she wanted to die “as a fulfilled woman” (Custody113).

Though Shagun has a strong desire to start her life anew with Ashok Khanna, she is in conflict with regard to their status in this marriage as, “she could see no place for the children in new set-up” (Custody141). She is angry at Raman for not consenting to mutual divorce and tells her mother that she wanted nothing of him except her own freedom. When Arjun suffered from imaginary pains and refused to go to school, she realizes her fault of leaving her husband and for the first time has major fight with Ashok Khanna for being non-understanding in matters related to her children. She takes full control when her son’s schooling was discussed by Ashok who wished to
put him up in Dehradun Public Academy. She even trains Arjun to show his preference for mother during court trials and Raman could only fret about “manipulations and deviousness” (Custody 215). When Ashok Khanna got a posting abroad, Shagun gave up all claims for property and legal guardianship of children except visitation rights, as she wanted to marry him legally and go abroad. Once both the children were in Raman’s custody, he agreed for mutual divorce. Shagun brought the jewellery to be given as a gift to Roohi once she grows up and Raman could see that she really wanted no other thing except her own freedom, “Not a shred, not a pin, not a rupee would she keep of their former life” (Custody 257). This assessment by the husband speaks volumes of her strength of character as a woman who valued her freedom more than any material benefits from an estranged marriage. Her mother too is finally relieved to see her daughter leaving for a foreign land “in the pursuit of happiness” (Custody 259). Shagun settles abroad with Ashok Khanna and finds her own social space there by starting import business, so as to be on “more secure grounds” in a foreign land (Custody 361). She thus fulfills her desire to be independent which she had nurtured as a young girl.

Ishita, the other woman character in the novel, who was left by her first husband due to her infertility, remarries Raman after a brief period of courtship. The fact that remarriage takes place in the court and without the knowledge of the parents, is a major step towards an autonomous self and involves breaking the stereotypical pattern of marriage. She, though later on, informs the parents who are surprised as well as happy to see their daughter settled in life. After marriage, Ishita takes control of the whole house and is fondly attached to the two children. Although marriage was a ‘series of tests’ that Ishita had to go through, she resolved that “she would leave no stone unturned to make life better” (Custody 327). As the custody case with Shagun proceeds, it is Ishita who takes care that the children are not exposed to the “see-sawing between real and biological mother” (Custody 357). She tells Raman clearly, “I can’t bear this half- here-half-there. I have given her everything—not because of you, but because of her” (Custody 359). Ishita did not allow Shagun to meet Roohi when she came from abroad and told Raman to file a case for the sole custody of the child. She prepared Roohi enough to show her preference for Ishita during a trial in the court and felt relieved as, “she had taken steps to anchor what was hers” (Custody 404). During the trial, custody for Roohi is given to Raman and for Arjun to Shagun
and Ishita feels on the top of the mountain for she had loved her more than Raman” (Custody133). Ishita finds this school in Mandavili as a completely different world and now everyday she, “woke with a purpose” in her life (Custody135). Mrs. Hingorani appreciates Ishita’s efforts to collect donations for school and Ishita felt “valued for the first time by the outside world” and in this way she felt fulfilled in her motherhood. Ishita’s resolve earlier to join a school for the slum children and her close association with an NGO run by Mrs. Hingorani clearly depict her as a woman of courage, “who longed to fly” (Custody 136). Thus, the writer, through her various women characters, repeatedly asserts that it is their creative and meaningful engagement in the social world outside home and family that really provides value to their lives and redefines the meaning and significance of autonomy for them.

Manju Kapur thus discusses the societal issues regarding the vulnerability of women and explores in a well defined manner the attempts made by her women characters to chart out their personal space in a patriarchal set up. This personal space is aspired and achieved with reference to opting for higher education, getting engaged in socially meaningful work, exploring female sexuality, establishing as entrepreneurs, travelling across national boundaries and discreetly assimilating in the global culture. This inching towards autonomy has strengthened her women protagonists in innumerable ways and they have been successful in actualizing their heart’s desires as well as much of their hidden and repressed potential, though the journey has been fraught with unresolved conflicts and contradictions, pain, isolation and terrible sufferings.

Autonomy that Sidhwa seeks in the novel The Crow Eaters is the autonomy of freedom from the impressions and perceptions of the English and the colonial world. Putli and Jerbanoo, who had testing time while attending parties at the Government House, are ‘disillusioned’ to meet English people in their ordinary walks of life during their stay in England for vacations. Their disenchantment is complete as Sidhwa depicts:

Within two days of landing in London their disillusion was complete…they saw meek, unassuming men with mournful, retiring eyes…saw seedy looking Englishmen sweep the roads…met sales girls, clerks and businessmen; all English… the expression on the faces of Londoners was no different from that stamped on the faces of a cross-section of India. (The Crow Eaters 253)
They begin to question themselves in their mental observations: “where were the Kings and queens, the lords and ladies and their gleaming carriages?” *(The Crow Eaters* 253) and both of them observed that the superiority that these rulers exhibited in India was tacit. Both these women noted that there was no concept of joint family in England. The one striking thing which threw them out of their wits was when they found Mr. Allen, who had served as commissioner in India, clean his toilets himself, and that served as the “final blow” *(The Crow Eaters* 253). Jerbanoo felt betrayed as she “could not relate the superior Mrs. Allen to the inconsequential drudge… her idols toppled…leaving nothing but a pulverized residue of contempt” *(The Crow Eaters* 254). Mrs. Allen who had so much airs about being commissioners’ wife while in India, was transformed to an overworked house-wife. Jerbanoo resolves to assert her choice by calling Mrs. Allen as ‘May-ree’ and Mr. Allen as ‘Charlie.’

The autonomy that Sidhwa depicts relates to physical as well as mental space. Freddy and Putli spend time sight-seeing and shopping with Allen while Jerbanoo, because of her old age, preferred to stay at home. Jerbanoo, though physically old, is young at heart and makes the best of every situation. Coming to London and once acquainted with the basics of culture, her domineering attribute comes to the fore in the form of orders for various things to ‘May-ree’ and by the time Jerbanoo left England; she was able to construct full sentences in English. This is indicative of her desire to learn and her understanding of the need to adapt and assimilate in various ways while living in a foreign land, especially in the field of learning language because it is language that can take one into the inner recesses of a country’s culture, its economy, history and technology. In this way Sidhwa’s approach towards the issue of autonomy is similar to that of Kapur where autonomy desired is not only personal but also national and cross-cultural. Mary was hospitable to Jerbanoo and tolerated her meddling nature till it gets beyond her limits and she is forced to ask Jerbanoo to stick to her room upstairs. Jerbanoo, feeling offended, declared the same evening that she missed her grand children and that she wanted to go home. Sidhwa depicts her state in a very realistic manner: “penned in a small room, Jerbanoo felt trapped and, like a caged tigress enacted tempestuous scenes” *(The Crow Eaters* 260). This forced Freddy to leave Allen’s place and get shifted to a hotel where Jerbanoo moved through the various streets of London on her own. She attracted lot of attention of the motley group of young people and her “inherently robust confidence scaled new heights”
The Crow Eaters 263). She bullied whoever tried to address her and bullied shop assistants. When Putli invites her to go with them, she rejects straight away saying, “I am content to be my own…I can do without somebody’s don’t do this and don’t do that!” (The Crow Eaters 264)

Jerbanoo is so confident that she even asserts herself with the constable on duty in a foreign land and chides the motley group of Londoners. She created troubles in the hotel also where they were staying which forced them all to leave the place and come back to India almost one and half month earlier. Yet the protagonist was not to be subdued and kept moving exercising her autonomy in her own way. Before going to England too, Jerbanoo exercises her agency in a number of ways. From the very beginning she was against the journey which Freddy had taken, moving from his ancestral village in central India to the fertile land of Punjab, in Lahore. Jerbanoo tells Freddy categorically, “Don’t think I am going to dance to your tune all the time. I’ve come for my daughter’s sake” (The Crow Eaters18). After settling in Lahore, Jerbanoo extended her circle with neighboring women as a means to giving vent to their emotions and sharing things. She out rightly rejects another elderly woman’s advice to her to give more importance to Faredoon (Freddy) than her daughter, as he was the bread winner and retorts back, “you (referring to Soonamai) may be a hypocrite and a toady-that is your lookout and your family’s concern-but don’t expect me to join you!” (The Crow Eaters73)

Jerbanoo is a woman of character and strength. When Freddy sets the house and store on fire to claim insurance and to get rid of his mother-in-law, who was alone in the house at that time, Jerbanoo exhibits uncanny strength and comes out safe in the balcony. In the meantime the fire-brigade man had reached and she was safely brought out of the burning house. Jerbanoo’s mere presence was enough to invite respect for her dignified existence and defiant attitude towards life. A close reading of the text reveals that Jerbanoo does not fail to voice her protest or advice as and when the situation demands. When Yazdi, her grandson, was told by Freddy that his beloved Rosy Watson was a prostitute; he was shocked and called his father a liar. He locked himself up in the room for three consecutive days and refused to submit to the repeated requests made by his mother and siblings. Jerbanoo was concerned and tried to coax an answer from Putli, but when Putli refused to disclose, “Jerbanoo rocked the flat to its foundations by storming for one solid hour” (The Crow Eaters 157). When
Yazdi comes out of his self-exile in the house, he was a completely changed person. He was extra careful towards his grandmother and treated the servants with utmost humility. In school, he took pity on the poor and distributed his bag, books and shoes and even clothes. When Putli and Freddy were in a fix as to how to handle the adult in Yazdi, it is Jerbanoo again who comes with her wisdom and advises them to send him to a boarding school in Karachi, saying: “send him to school in Karachi. The change will do him good and he will have a chance to meet lots of Parsi girls and boys” (*The Crow Eaters* 158).

At the time of elder son’s illness too, when Putli and Freddy were again in anxiety, Jerbanoo takes charge almost as a superwoman. The writer presents her autonomy over the situation thus: “Jerbanoo was indefatigable. She bathed his forehead, stroked his frail limbs and administered medicine whenever she could relieve Putli. She ran errands with an alacrity they had not expected of her” (*The Crow Eaters* 173). After Soli’s death, the family visited the site of burial and Jerbanoo declared in the midst of tears that “I want the plot right next to Soli reserved for me. Putli, promise you will bury me here” (*The Crow Eaters* 180). This statement by Jerbanoo is indicative of the mental strength to demand autonomy in matters of life after death. When Billy came home for study leave and took charge of all homely affairs, even curtailing the meddling visits by his grandmother Jerbanoo, she did not take things lying down and once again exercised her independence and freedom in a most emphatic manner. She “asserted herself against her new enemy, Billy, and had succeeded in cowering the sixteen year old to a point where he refrained from interfering” (*The Crow Eaters* 183).

Jerbanoo is one character in the novel that is always moving forward and lending support to her daughter whenever required. When the family goes to Bombay to settle a match for Billy (Behram), Jerbanoo is looked up to: “Her role was that of an observant and assessor. She had accompanied Putli to lend her imposing and corpulent support” (*The Crow Eaters* 199). Jerbanoo’s strength provided confidence to Putli also to move in the direction of taking her own stand in difficult times, as during Billy’s refusal to marry Roshan, daughter of a wealthy merchant in Bombay since he was determined to marry another girl of his choice named Tanya. Though Jerbanoo rebuked Billy for this impoliteness and bad mannerism, yet Putli is seen taking the most appreciable stand by writing a letter in Gujrati to Rodabai, Tanya’s
mother that her son wished to marry Tanya and not Roshan. She also wrote that no dowry was required. So it is the woman of the house, instead of the male, who is depicted as taking a stand and finding a solution to the unwary problem. Sidhwa, through the character of Jerbanoo, is hinting at the progressive and gradually emerging autonomous stance of women in Parsi household. Sidhwa’s protagonists exercise their agency to inch forward breaking the barriers which are more of emotional kind than physical.

The Pakistani Bride is significant from the point of view of re-visioning autonomy since it provides courage, capacity to act and take decisions to different women characters in the retrogressive Pakistani society where most women are restricted to zenanas (separate place confined to women), nursing the children and have little access to education. The conditions are particularly challenging in the Kohistani tribal culture where men lay great emphasis on honor and honor-kilings and feuds are part of their life-style. It is a society where women are bought and sold like goods. They have no existence beyond their husbands. The novel traces the life story of Zaitoon, an orphaned girl, whose parents become victims of the partition trauma. She is adopted by a Kohistani tribal, Qasim, who had come to the plains after losing his family in an epidemic in the mountains. In Zaitoon he saw, “courage and a forbearance that met the exacting standards of his own tribe” (The Pakistani Bride 30).

After reaching safely to Lahore, Qasim decides to settle in the thicket of Muslim community and there befriends Nikka Pehalwan and his wife Miriam, who, being childless herself, takes charge of Zaitoon’s upbringing.

When Qasim decides to bestow sixteen year old Zaitoon to Misri Khan’ son, Sakhi, as a way of settling the loan he had incurred a long time back, Miriam steps out of her Purdah and dares to tell Qasim that people out there are savages, brutish and uncouth and that tribal ways are different from that of people in the plains. She says, “Why, most of them are bandits, they don’t know how to treat women! I tell you, she’ll be a slave, you watch, and she’ll have no one to turn to. No one!” (The Pakistani Bride 93-94). Miriam further questions Qasim: “Is it because that Pathan offered you five hundred rupees--some mealy maize and a few goats? Is that you are selling her like a greedy merchant?”(The Pakistani Bride 94) It is a bold and daring step by a burkha woman who not only questions the selfish motives of Qasim, but is even ready to marry Zaitoon to her own husband Nikka to protect her from the unending pain and
torture in a tribal land. Her only aim at this juncture is to safeguard Zaitoon’s interest. She is desirous of preventing Zaitoon to be a scapegoat in this trading between the two tribal men.

However she is defeated in her attempt because Zaitoon agrees to marry according to her father’s wishes and dreams of a heroic world in the mountainous region, which gets shattered as soon as she reaches there. Zaitoon realizes the futility of her attempt to adjust in her new house-hold with each day coming to end with harsh beating from her husband, Sakhi. Even her innocent gazing at the jeeps in the distance rouses Sakhi’s wrath and she is almost beaten to death. Sakhi’s thoughtless, cruel and inhumane behavior forces her to take the bold step of leaving the comfort of home and run away in the hazardous terrain of mountains. Zaitoon’s fearless spirit is endorsed by Indira Bhatt who observes, “Sidhwa presents in a sixteen year old Zaitoon a powerful character that prefers death in the mountains to dying slowly and gradually, to being beaten into a spiritless woman like her mother-in-law Hamida” (157).

Zaitoon knows that escaping from the mountains is almost impossible since the mountains are treacherously pathless. She is not sure where the mountain tract will lead her but she is sure that if once she reaches the bridge, there is hope for life, on the other side of it. To avoid being caught by the tribes, she chooses a difficult path and is lost, “Zaitoon knew that somewhere in the serpentine vaults of the ravine and in the glacier-river valleys she had lost her direction…and mountains closed in on her like a pack of wolves” (The Pakistani Bride 197). The Mountains that she had loved once had lost its splendor and were now her enemy, a hostile inscrutable menace. For nine days and nights she wandered in the mountains like a wounded animal but her courage prevails and she ultimately succeeds in reaching major Mushtaq and his military camp across the bridge.

Zaitoon’s odyssey from the plains to the mountains and back to the plains is symbolic of the inner journey of the young woman from the fancy world of love, fiction and heroes to the callous realities of life. Sidhwa uses the imagery of the crippled but flying bird to emphasize the condition of Zaitoon. Her flight is both against man and Nature, which she can vanquish through her sheer will-power, “the strength of nature, a force, perhaps of God, within one” (The Pakistani Bride 229). Zaitoon exercises her agency and will power and finally escapes the clutches of her husband and the tribal
community, who treat women as mere commodities and feel that they can use violence as they willed. Fariha Chaudhary sums up her courage thus:

Sidhwa’s Zaitoon is shown to exercise her inner strength when she battles with her body as if asking her khudi to raise itself, to free itself from the material confines of her flesh/body and allow her strength to direct the course of her own life. (99)

Zaitoon, who belonged to the plains, is able to arouse consciousness in the tribal women to comprehend their plight which is crystallized in Hamida whose sympathies are with Zaitoon and who does not want Zaitoon to be caught since she feels that her escape “would teach the men-folk a lesson” (The Pakistani Bride 216). Sidhwa’s message is that women’s mutual support to each other can go a long way in challenging the oppressive man order. Zaitoon is endowed with determination and ability to stand up and fight against all odds and she is able to escape the environment which would have suffocated her to death. Indira Bhatt observes:

Silently but forcefully Zaitoon has established her individuality…We have the picture of Zaitoon moving from passivity to active assertion of her will against the imprisoning, cold and cruel men and mountains, from the masculine brutality and rigid patterns of existence she escapes to the powerful intimidating and terrifying mountains, and ultimately defying her fate she crosses over to the free and normal life of civilization. (160-1)

The writer, through the predicament of Zaitoon, tries to establish that even in the worst of circumstances, there is hope for women through struggle to see the light of the day and subvert the patriarchal order and conventions. Zaitoon’s undaunted spirit is expressed in her defying the dictates of the male-dominated world, its rigid structures and regressive ideology. Robert Ross rightly comments:

Sidhwa’s stories are always about women, who dare to go beyond the limits set for them, along with her own story, can only raise the awareness of women-and of men as well. (165)

Sidhwa presents Zaitoon as a powerful girl that prefers death in the mountains to being reduced to the status of a mindless slave. In the words of Srivastava and Avneesh, Zaitoon’s “choice of freedom over slavery, her rejection of the oppressive and brutal tribal society, her courageous and heroic struggle for survival against
impossible odds—all these are a testimony to the fighting spirit of the weak and the crushed” (157). Her autonomy can well be appreciated when posited against the vulnerability of other women characters like Afshan, Shehnaz and Hamida (Zaitoon’s mother-in-law), who are not in a position to challenge the patriarchal order and submit to the will of men. Zaitoon truly represents the indomitable and irrepressible spiritual and mental strength of human mind which is necessary to overcome any sort of tyranny and assault on woman’s dignified existence.

*Cracking India* is significant from the point of view of re-visioning autonomy since it presents the role of women characters during the partition trauma in a totally new light. In the story narrated from the point of view of an eight year old child, women characters, instead of being presented as mere victims of violence, are shown in the thick of social and cultural scene, initiating action, taking a lead and finally emerging as agents of change in the radical restructuring of the meaning and significance of individual and collective autonomy. Bapsi Sidhwa belongs to that group of women creative writers who believe in depicting “the determined women, for whom traditional role is inadequate, a woman who wishes to affirm their independence and autonomy and is perfectly capable of assuming new roles and responsibilities” (Dar1).

The female protagonist Lenny, who narrates the story, not only observes the horrible faces of violence but also tends to analyze it from the point of view of a woman who is forced to become a victim of male’s sexual desires and ruthless frenzy, thus contributing to female agency and active involvement in the whole saga of partition. She facilitates this sense of “feminine agency through the novel’s narrative structure as her own increasing awareness of social constructions, and her ability to utilize these constructions to advance to their own purposes” (Kleist 71). As a female narrator, Lenny facilitates a more balanced perception both of the female characters and of the social systems which they were able to surmount and thus, her narration, as Ambreen Hai opines, creates a “double feminist lens…challenging the centrality and exclusivity of…masculine master narratives”( 390).

Through her observations of Ayah’s exchanges with her suitors, Lenny specifies that she learns not only about the nature of individuals and the way to get what she wants from them, but also about the particular dynamics of their gendered interactions. Lenny is quick enough to acknowledge her debt to Ayah: “I learn fast. I gain Ayah’s goodwill and complicity by accommodating her need to meet friends and relatives.
She takes me to fairs, cheap restaurants and slaughter-houses. I cover up for her and maintain a canny silence about her doings. I learn of human needs, frailties, cruelties and joys. I also learn from her the tyranny magnets exercise over metals” (Cracking India 20).

Lenny also equips her with the observations of what is expected of female family members like her mother in particular and then learns to employ these behaviors herself. She recalls, “When Mother pauses, on cue, I repeat any remarks I’m supposed to have made and ham up the performance with further innocently insightful observations” (Cracking India 88). Thus, Sidhwa emphasizes Lenny’s growing awareness of how her use of discourse has the potential to be either aligned with or resistant to the expected feminine behaviors. She chooses to comply with gendered social norms in certain situations, while in others, including her interactions with her male cousin, Lenny demonstrates agency by electing to deviate from traditional gender roles. In contrast to her mother’s routine treatment of her father, Lenny does not feel obligated to cater to her cousin’s preferences. She, instead, expressed her opinions and occasional disgust with his actions in a forthright and direct manner. When he tries to coax her into new kinds of sexual behaviors, she states, “I like Cousin. I’ve even thought of marrying him when we grow up, but this is a side of him I’m becoming aware of for the first time, and I don’t like it” (Cracking India 172).

Here, Lenny clearly evinces her awareness of what is expected in romantic relationships which often result in increasing intimacy and eventual marriage. Rather than being willingly dominated by the male, she chooses not to conform, telling Cousin that she is not interested, making her own preferences known, and threatening to further “insult” his masculinity if he does not respect her wishes. This frustrates her cousin beyond comprehension as he expresses: “She loves approximately half of Lahore…Why can’t she love me?” (Cracking India 245)

Simultaneously, her frequent visits to Mr. and Mrs. Singh’s ‘large bungalow’ where various people gather to discuss world affairs, help her in developing an early acquaintance with the pains and pleasures of the grown-ups particularly related with human relationships.

However, Lenny’s world is completely shattered with the abduction of Ayah by a group of local fanatic Muslims led by Ice candy man who tricks Lenny into revealing the truth about Ayah’s hiding by posing as a ‘savior’ in the ‘hour of need.’ Before Lenny is able to realize the horrible consequences of her innocent ‘betrayal,’ Ayah is
dragged by the frenzied group to the cart with her ‘piteously gaping’ mouth and her ‘terrified eyes’ crying for help and protection of her modesty. Lenny punishes her ‘vile, truth-infected’ tongue severely for being so ‘slippery and slick as a fish’ by almost wrenching it out in front of the bathroom mirror until ‘it is sore and bleeding’ but the harm has already been done. Life without Ayah is like living in a ‘depressing hell-hole’ filled with sighs and repentance till one day Ayah is seen moving in a taxi ‘all made up’ since she has been coerced into becoming a prostitute after repeated sexual exploitations by religious fanatics including Ice candy man who has taken his revenge upon her for being more inclined and loving towards Masseur.

Through Ayah’s capture and sexual exploitation, the writer demonstrates awareness of the traditional feminine loss of power for a short while. However, Sidhwa soon reverses the traditional roles so as to depict the strength and agency of feminine power. Prior to Partition, Lenny’s mother played the role of a dutiful wife, catering to her husband’s every need, rubbing his feet when he returned from work and managing the household. During the events of Partition, however, Lenny’s mother begins to subvert the patriarchal social order by rescuing and housing women. Directly ignoring the warnings of a male neighbor, who cautions the family to remain neutral, Lenny’s mother steps outside the role of traditional woman and as an impartial Parsi community member tries to affect change in the lives of women who have been physically and sexually abused. After women in their community are raped or forced into prostitution, Lenny’s mother and aunts construct a refuge for these “fallen women” behind a neighboring house, attempting to restore the women to their families or to find housing and work for those who, seen as permanently shamed and defiled, cannot return home. Additionally, “they smuggle gasoline to help their Hindu and Sikh friends cross the border safely to India” (Cracking India 254).

In rescuing these women, Lenny’s mother has clearly moved beyond the traditional role of housewife to become a social activist. Rather than having her influence destroyed by Partition, like Ayah, the crisis of Partition provides an occasion for Lenny’s mother to act and create positive change. Even Lenny notices this difference in her mother. No longer content to remain home all day to supervise the housework and cater to her husband’s demands, her mother now “develops a busy air of secrecy and preoccupation…She shoots off in the Morris, after Father drudges off on his bicycle; and returns late in the afternoon—and scoots out again” (Cracking India
153

182). The energy and efficiency of her mother is clearly reflected through the use of words like “shoots” and “scoots” in the family car, which go on to illustrate the agency of her mother, adding to the autonomy she exhibits in assembling a community network of support and exerting a positive influence in the abducted women’s lives.

The independent and active nature of Lenny’s mother encompasses “the heroic role of women in leading the revolution against inequality, abuse, and social injustice, both for themselves and for the other exploited groups in society” (Sethi 133). She demonstrates agency by engaging in a crucial and life-saving act for the “fallen” women, affecting extensive and valuable change. Similarly, the unique power of Lenny’s godmother is evident as she exerts the most notable feminine authority in the novel, traversing social boundaries and ultimately determining the futures of Ayah and Ice-Candy-Man. Lenny can sense Godmother’s unique power and feels safe in her presence. In fact, Lenny describes her bond with her godmother as “stronger than the bond of motherhood. More satisfying than the ties between men and women.” (Cracking India 4) It is not only Lenny’s empowering relationship with Godmother, but Godmother herself who constitutes feminine strength. Lenny’s Godmother, an extremely influential and powerful character ‘who retains her power throughout the events surrounding Partition’, is finally able to exercise her influence in rescuing and transferring Ayah from the brothel house in Hira Mandi to one of the Recovered Women’s Camp initially and finally sending her back to her family in Amritsar. In addition to being exceptionally informed and insightful, Godmother also has the power to exert influence; her feminine power lies not only in knowledge, but also in action. Lenny has ultimate confidence in Godmother’s ability to affect or prevent change and states: “She can move mountains from the paths of those she befriends, and erect mountainous barriers where she deems it necessary” (Cracking India 223). Godmother even facilitates Ranna’s acceptance to a prestigious convent school, which Lenny refers to as “a minor miracle…as difficult as transposing him to a prosperous continent, and as beneficial, not only for him, it is said, but for seven succeeding generations of the Ranna progeny” (Cracking India 223). This “demonstrates that Godmother possesses the power not only to change the current circumstances of individuals, but to influence their futures and those of their descendants, altering the overall trajectories of their lives” (Kleist 76). Unlike other
female figures of the novel, Godmother has transcended her sexuality and emerged as an authoritative presence that is able to achieve what she desires. She is empowered with mature understanding of human existence and her wisdom is revealed when she consoles Ayah after the terrible turn of events, “That was fated, daughter. It can’t be undone. But it can be forgiven…Worse things are forgiven… Hurt, happiness…all fades impartially…to make way for fresh joy and new sorrow. That is the way of life” (Cracking India 262). The most glorious example of her ability to handle any kind of situation is provided by her dealing with the Ice-candy man and the rescue of Ayah from ‘Hira Mandi.’ Her character has been very well summed up by Subhash Chandra when he says, “Godmother concentrates in her character what the feminists feel is very important for a woman to realize her individuality: the feeling of ‘self-worth’” (123). Godmother’s triumph at the end of the novel establishes the subjectivity, strength and defining characteristic of feminine power. Most of the other partition novels in English, as well as in other languages, have concentrated largely on the helplessness of women inclined against oppressive male forces. However, the dominant note in this novel is not the victimization of women but their strong determination and sustained effort to fight against it so as to turn it over into a moment of personal and social transformation. It is this new dimension of women’s courage and agency which reshapes and revisions the significance of autonomy in their lives.

In her next novel An American Brat the feeling of self-worth and the urge to further explore the terrain of woman’s freedom continues with Feroza as the main protagonist. Feroza is presented as a diffident girl at the beginning of the novel and as the story moves, Feroza’s movement to America shapes her into a bold and confident woman who begins to live her life independently. Her transformation in America does not occur in a single day but takes several years as she gradually discovers to be ‘unself-conscious’ and free from various constraints that had earlier governed her life. This ‘coming of age’ as a woman and as an immigrant is what redefines autonomy in the present novel.

Feroza’s journey from Pakistan, her native country, and its culture begins with a lot of uncertainty and discomfiture and ends with her initiation into the new culture and progressive ways of life. The writer observes Feroza’s emotional pulls, her fears during the journey as, “she became conscious also of the gravitational pull of the
country, and she was leaving behind. Her sense of the self, enlarged by the osmosis of identity with her community and her group of school friends, stayed with her like permanence...” (*An American Brat* 53) Feroza, having spent twenty dollars on little bits, was reminded that, “many families in Pakistan lived on less each month” (*An American Brat* 87). She was handling money of her own, which brought a sense of responsibility that she had not experienced earlier. Feroza guessed from the way Manek, her uncle, guided her that he must have faced countless humiliations and that his experiences had “changed him not on the surface but fundamentally” (*An American Brat* 102). When Manek narrated to her how he had met a serious accident in New York but had not written about it home, Feroza could make out that, “it had been more an assertion of his fierce need to be himself- than any inordinate concern for Khutlibai” (*An American Brat* 103).

Feroza is introduced to Father Fibbs who proves to be a lively guide to Feroza’s journey of self-awakening. Father tells Feroza, “You will fall and fly, fly and fall and fly…it will hurt. You will be frightened. Don’t be. Your wings will become stronger” (*An American Brat* 116). It soon became clear to Feroza that it would be a testing time for her to be staying this far from home and coping with strange people and customs. Growing her wings, Feroza even took to smoking at the insistence of Jo’s friends, though she worshipped fire. Later, feeling guilty of her act, she takes out her *kusti* to pray and asks for forgiveness to Ahura Mazda. She kept the growth of her wings as a secret even from her uncle Manek as “this sense of growth and discovery” was to be solely hers and she wanted to take the ride all alone, independent of any influences from family” (*An American Brat* 164). Visualization of the plan to stay back for graduation from American University was a well thought decision welcomed by Feroza’s mother Zareen who told her mother, “A good education is a good thing...Mumma times have changed...A lot of people are sending their daughters for education to America” (*An American Brat* 121). Thus, one observes a pattern of considerable shift in the thinking of the protagonist’s mother, when compared with earlier mothers, who could not transcend the patriarchal fold. One can see in Zareen an un-daunting spirit who proves to be pillar of strength for her daughter and provides her the launching pad from where Feroza can take a flight to unknown and unrealized paths.
Manek and Feroza are juxtaposed by Sidhwa as a narrative strategy to show the marked intellectual strength of her protagonist. Feroza confronts her uncle Manek at the smallest available opportunity, revealing her indomitable spirit to resist, protest and decide. Bapsi Sidhwa’s query as to whether one could ‘be prepared enough’ to face life in all its mysterious recesses in the cruel race for survival, is applicable to all the immigrants, irrespective of region, caste, class and gender. The college where Feroza wanted to study offered a stipend and Jo, her new room-mate, who arranges for her requirements and instructs her on all matters, becomes her friend, philosopher and guide. Jo, in fact, takes responsibility of Feroza’s life and both friends then join the University of Denver for the hotel management course. Feroza’s friendship with Jo helps her to learn the American way of life. She faces several challenges continuously which help her understand the changes within her. Feroza and Jo moved off-campus to a two bedroom apartment and Feroza was “thrilled at the thought of living on her own with just Jo” (An American Brat155). Gradually, as one of the critics points out, “Feroza succeeds in the process of transformation and integration and outgrows Jo and acquires friendship, knowledge and confidence” (Agarwal185).

Feroza now wanted to experience everything that came within her range away from the constraints of conventions and taboos. She wanted to be person who loathed wearing masks in the name of religion and suppress the ecstasy of novelty. Feroza was elated when for the first time she drove Jo’s car in America and expressed her joy to her uncle Manek that it was a thrilling venture for her. Feroza had not only taken control of her own life but even was able to support Jo, whenever she was emotionally shattered in her relationship with Mike, Jo’s boy friend. When the apartment shared by Jo and Feroza was burgled, Jo instantly shifted to a hotel and it was a feat for Feroza who thought, “How many girls did she know in Lahore-or-anywhere who could decide to move out of their homes to spend a night in a motel? To Feroza it was an unimaginable feat accomplished, a lottery won.” (An American Brat 186) It was important for her to have control on her life and to be able to take quick decisions as and when confronted with any difficult situation.

Feroza’s encounter with the New World transforms her into a responsible, self-reliant and self-confident person. Her transformation reaches its climax when she meets a handsome young American Jew, David Press, to buy his second-hand car, leading to a passionate love-affair between the two. When Zareen hears about Feroza’s intention
to marry David, she sets out to dissuade her rebellious daughter from marrying a non-Parsi because it would never be acceptable on religious and cultural grounds. Zareen is ultimately successful in causing a break-up between the two but Feroza resolves to stay in America only since this was the place that provided her the freedom, comforts and choices that she needed to make her life meaningful.

Sidhwa’s genius lies in the fact that she provides her woman protagonists with an atmosphere of freedom and agency which become a key factor in their decision of staying abroad. This applies to a woman’s autonomy over her sexuality as well. A section of women in America saw heterosexual love and marriages as means of subverting patriarchal oppression. Feroza tells her mother that her room-mates are lesbians because they cannot stand the pain of break-ups with their boyfriends. She saw sexual liberty as a form of empowerment. Asif makes a pertinent note:

Feroza felt that she needs a personal space for being independent about her life… Feroza decides to stay in the U.S. instead of going back to her country because she believed that it is empowering for her. (105)

Sidhwa highlights the agency exercised by Feroza even in the social scenario where apparently Jo is in the position of power and authority. Her refusal to go back to her old conservative life in Pakistan makes it evident that she seeks autonomy in every aspect, namely body, soul and mind. She has tasted the fruits of freedom and does not wish to be confined by the traditional ways of her community. Her mother may deem her ‘an American Brat’ but she too is contented to see the transformation of her daughter from the innocent naïve child to a confident young woman.

Her stay in America has taught her to take her own decisions and assert her self-identity through her immigrant experience. However, as Bhaskar Pandey says, she is not presented as a rebel “who goes against the society and the religion to marry a person she loves. Instead, it presents gradual adapting and acceptance of the American culture by the girl.” (23) Yet, the fact that she has learnt to handle her personal affairs, is equally significant. Both Feroza and Zareen travel at the physical level as also at intellectual level and enjoy their liberated world in America. They find themselves treated as individuals in their own right and not merely as commodities as wife, daughter or sister. The self-assertive and mature Feroza, despite an estranged love affair and general feeling of depression, does not meekly return to Lahore for an
arranged marriage, but prefers the struggle for freedom and self-fulfillment while staying in America itself.

Bapsi Sidhwa’s last novel under discussion, *Water*, delves into the struggle of women characters around the most controversial socio-cultural issues including patriarchy, religion, poverty, child prostitution and forbidden love, in an attempt to create some personal and social space for themselves in a world which is not so kind to young widows and poor women. The struggle is brought to light through the stories of three widows: Chuyia, a child widow who breathes life into the ashram; Kalyani, a beautiful young widow, who falls in love with a reformist law student Narayan and Shakuntala, a devout believer in the traditions who struggles to make sense of the realities that surround her. The three women make the best of the circumstances in which they are placed and are seen moving towards a state of autonomy, unshackling the fetters of conventions, customs and religion.

Chuyia is the youngest of the three generations of widows imbued with the energy and fierceness of an adult. Her fate has taught her to fight against the circumstances in which she has been forced to live, without being daunted by the challenges life puts in her journey all the way through. Chuyia becomes an intermediary through whom Kalyani and Narayan come together and express their feelings for each other. Unable to understand the meanings and manifestations of various religious customs and rituals, Chuyia is fed up with the constant prayers recited by Shakuntala and would want it to be over sooner than later. Sidhwa exposes the hypocrisy involved in the outward piety of priests through Sadanand who, while ‘ministering to his flock of widows,’ could not control his lust for the young, the middle aged and even the elderly widows, “And the eroticism in him was heightened by their vulnerability and availability” (Sidhwa, *Water* 95). Chuyia was sharp enough to notice the discomfort of the widows sitting in a semi-circle around Sadanand and curiously questions, “where is the house for men-widows?”(*Water* 97) At this Chuyia was scolded by the widows in chorus, “Good-God!... God protect our men from such a fate!...pull out her tongue and throw it in the river...I’ll do it!” they shrieked” (*Water* 98). Even under such terrible conditioning of the minds in favor of conservative ideology and practices, Sidhwa’s protagonists do not accept things without challenging the rudiments that deter the growth of progressive thought, though it invites immense dissatisfaction and wrath of those who believe in conventions.
Chuyia asserts her real self through putting up a brave struggle against child-marriage which she underwent at the tender age of six or seven, when she was completely unaware of even the meaning of marriage and child widow. Forcibly confined to a widow ashram, Chuyia, as yet, unaware of the vagaries of fate, passes her time playing various games and trying to find her way out to live a life apparently filled with playfulness and collectivity. After her arrival, even the lives of Kalyani and Shakuntala, undergo a change that moves them to interact fluidly and unpredictably to the rigidity imposed by the conventional society. Chuyia’s little education and knowledge of words coupled with her predicament transform her into a girl who is mature enough to relate the story of her life to that of sage Kanva, narrated by Shakuntala. She feels sad relating the story to her own giving away to Hira Lal by her father and complainingly inquires:

‘Why did her father give her away to the sage?’ not happy with this bit of news.

‘Sometimes fathers have to give their daughters away.’ Shakuntala said gently.

‘They shouldn’t!’ Chuyia said, looking at the floor to hide the sudden tears that sprang to her eyes (Water109).

Chuyia reveres Shakuntala like a goddess and often expresses it saying, “You are my Durga” (Water110). Shakuntala helped Chuyia to come to terms with the harsh realities of her life. Chuyia, like Lenny in Cracking India, becomes Sidhwa’s mouth-piece and is the secret emissary between Kalyani and Narayan and “took her role seriously” (Water153). Kalyani’s concern for Chuyia is genuine. She can imagine the adult world of dual standards affecting Chuyia too in the times to come and therefore prepares Chuyia to resist. This is an instance of co-support mechanism which Sidhwa’s women often practice as is the case in Cracking India, where Lenny’s mother and aunts help women to escape the atrocities propounded by riots during partition. Despite Shakuntala’s unquestioning acceptance of the Dharma-Shastra’s, that widowhood is the punishment for a sinful existence in the past, Kalyani’s plight shook her belief in the religious laws and she starts challenging these rigid codes.

The relationship between Kalyani and Narayan brings to surface the cruelty of the prevailing customs and the gender bias practiced in male-dominated society. Kalyani, like Chuyia, never met her husband and did not even remember the time when she became a widow, “May be when I was nine,” she said, uncomfortable with her status
as a widow” (Water 147). Narayan, on the other hand, was told by his father that “childhood is a time for play, not marriage” (Water 148). Their relationship serves as a potent contrast to Kalyani’s imposed prostitution, which is enjoyed by Narayan’s father, a wealthy landowner, who had clandestinely used her for his gratification and then hypocritically called her a whore. Wicked denunciation of Kalyani’s prostitution exposes the hypocrisy of the male world where widow exploitation is condoned for men’s sexual needs, including child rape, as is the case of Chuyia at the end of the novel. Kalyani could understand Chuyia’s predicament well, since, many years ago, she herself had undergone the same horrifying situation and had learnt to compartmentalize her life: “.with childhood in one box and meetings with Narayan locked up in another” (Water 152). This is how the less fortunate sections of women are shown finding a way beyond the forced grief ordained for widows by this patriarchal society. In Kalyani, one can see untiring effort by Sidhwa’s woman characters to provide meaning to an existence which is otherwise made meaningless by hypocritical norms of the society. Kalyani shows her defiance by registering her protests against a life of exploitation forced upon them in the form of prostitution.

Chuyia is enraged at the cruel treatment meted out to Kalyani at the hands of Madhumati and wanted to avenge it by challenging the strictures of widowhood and hierarchy practiced by Madhumati. Sidhwa’s protagonist’s individual and collective fight against injustice is another form of arriving at their autonomous existence. Sidhwa tells us, “She (Chuyia) wanted to inflict a hurt as cruel as the one Madhumati had inflicted on Kalyani, as final as the way she had smashed Chuyia’s own hope” (Water 178). Kalyani, imprisoned in barsati, saying her prayers to the almighty, suddenly came to a realization that, “She was imprisoned as much by culture and traditions as by the bars and locks on the room” (Water 179). Shakuntala who had great respect for the priest Sadanand and his learning, questions him on the plight of the widows, “Panditji, is it written that widows should be treated badly?”(Water 184). His answering in measured words is indicative of the growth of the women characters in the direction of becoming more mature and awakened in their understanding of existential realities. Shakuntala’s realization that, “the law (related to widows) didn’t suit certain people in the ashram” (Water 185) makes her rebel against the deceit Madhumati had perpetuated on them all. Shakuntala was not the one to sit silent after
knowing the truth. She confronted Madhumati and demanded the keys to the room where Kalyani was locked so that she could release her free.

Madhumati, who had become the patriarchal figure in the ashram, was shocked at the way she was challenged by Shakuntala in the presence of all widows, who, in the novel, are symbolic of the meek, trodden, oppressed stratum of the Hindu society. Shakuntala, a representative force of strength of defiance, unlocked the door and commanded Kalyani to leave at once. Kalyani was amazed at such an exuberance of strength and was perplexed whether to leave or stay in the namesake security and safety of the ashram. Shakuntala repeated again, “What are you waiting for? Go. No one will stop you (Water 188). She even promised to send a word to Narayan, who will be there to take her in his embrace but for Kalyani, “this freedom comes at a tremendous price and suicide becomes a desirable and honorable option, which she lucidly embraces” (Water178). This act of Kalyani has a powerful rebellious impact on Narayan by making him aware of the hypocrisies of his family and he is compelled to leave his home.

Shakuntala is undoubtedly one of the most powerful characters in the novel who becomes instrumental in setting Kalyani free from the sufferings of widowhood and prostitution. It is she who saves Chuyia’s life from prostitution and helps her to gain her freedom. She fights against her own inner self steeped in dogmas to discover the ultimate truth and true meaning of life. Stefano Mercanti rightly points out that:

Sidhwa’s characters move toward more caring and enhancing scenarios by portraying relationships of mutual support in which human beings give evidence of ‘other’ possible patterns of the self and forms of co-existence. (162)

The journey of women like Shakuntala from adherence to orthodoxy to becoming an agent of change and emancipation is extremely significant. Similarly, Chuyia taking shelter in the liberal thought of Gandhiji signals a new kind of autonomy which is aligned with social and political dream of an emancipated India, free from the agony and exploitation of various social evils and conservative practices, a nation which can ensure the dignity and self respect of each and every citizen and particularly the poor and the marginalized women.
Re-Visioning Autonomy in the Context of Immigrant Wives:

Autonomy in the context of an immigrant acquires a different meaning and connotation in the sense that an immigrant’s psyche is shaped by continuous interaction of native and traditional culture with the culture of the adopted country. Apart from undergoing various changes in the extraneous ways of living, thinking and behavioral patterns, there is almost always a basic schism involved when it comes to merging and mingling in the foreign culture, especially for women. A feeling of being rootless overpowers them and they feel divided in heart and mind. It is more difficult for an immigrant wife to mingle due to homesickness, lack of meaningful engagement through independent work and status and above all due to terrible and unavoidable loneliness that she has to undergo due to different socio-cultural environment and individual centered ways of living and thinking. For an immigrant wife, the marital life, in spite of various material comforts and joint household responsibilities, basically and ultimately gets reduced to waiting and more waiting, especially if she herself is unemployed. The meaning and significance of marriage being different in the West and masculinity and sex not being limited to wife alone, her heart remains hungry for love and companionship. Nina, highly educated immigrant wife of Ananda, has to undergo terrible loneliness, having to stay all alone at home for a major part of the day and with no one else but Ananda to talk to and rely upon for all her happiness and fulfillment. The problem of loneliness becomes further complicated since the questions and issues related to assimilation, at a deeper level, tend to take different meanings for males and females. While it is relatively easy for males to change name, identity, habits, even perceptions, memories and ways of thinking but very difficult for a woman because they are more attached to their roots and it is not possible for husbands to understand the various facets of their loneliness. Hence, on majority of occasions, immigrant women feel rootless and branchless, but the same time, immigrant wives cling to “some notion of home” and make all out efforts to recreate the ‘motherland’.

Under the above conditions, a woman’s identity and autonomy in an immigrant country and her abiding urge for independent status and work, begins to acquire a central and defining place in her life and this brings offence to their husbands. Her desires and longings of the heart being constantly neglected, she soon begins to feel used, excluded and marginalized. She resents at her status being solely male-derived
and her real self being lost with all her dilemmas, loneliness and stereotypical expectations related to family and motherhood. Even a migrant wife tries to find her security in motherhood and children. Marriage and children continue to remain the main thing in her life and she feels insecure without children but she would not like to be treated as useful only in the sense of producing children and would like to retain control over her body and sexual decisions.

So a real challenge before a migrant woman is to explore her actual self and to minutely examine her conflicts, contradictions and dilemmas in an effort to find her feet and her sense of belongingness. It becomes significant for her to know whether her existence is related to just being somebody’s wife and a mere shadow or her life has a meaning on its own too. For an immigrant wife, a changed situation in a foreign land means a change in priorities also in the sense of her transition from being controlled by circumstances to being dictated by choice. Assertion of her subjecthood and agency begins to acquire new meaning. Her capacity to love somebody independently and on her own choice and sex might prove to be a liberating force of life to her that helps her in providing a “sense of herself.” Yet, many a times, this personal autonomy ultimately turns out to be illusory, since it too, is not, independent of men. It stems out and is related to a man only so ultimately this too results in distress, desolation and fragmentation of herself.

So finally she arrives at a conclusion that any kind of emotional dependence ultimately becomes an obstacle in realizing one’s autonomy and that a woman has to be her own anchor. She comes to realize the hard fact that since life is what an individual ‘makes of it’ so it is essential to have some purpose of one’s own in life. Yet a wife cannot be an immigrant in the same way as the husbands usually tend to become because she continues to feel that everything in her life is transient in nature and any claim for permanence is a farfetched reality. The ultimate experience that an immigrant wife can call her own is that one cannot rely on any set path or norms to assimilate oneself into an adapted land and that one has to find different ways to belong and ‘move on’ in life. As Manju Kapur’s protagonist Nina finally realizes that when one is reinventing oneself, anywhere could be ‘home.’ The analysis of two major novels based on immigrant woman’s experience, *The Immigrant* and *The American Brat*, shall focus on a woman’s autonomy in the context of Indian and Pakistani society’s ethos and how these protagonists move towards the realization of
their real selves in a foreign country undergoing various conflicts and vacillations, and overcoming various inhibitions in the process of assimilation in the new culture.

Nina in The Immigrant, a professor in English in a college in Delhi, had to leave her job and immigrate to a foreign land on account of her marriage with a dentist, Ananda, who was settled in Canada. With an intention to broaden her horizon of home, the writer places her character in an alien country to see how she adapts to the foreign culture and marches towards autonomous existence in the context of homeland and a foreign land. The schism between two cultures is visible right in the beginning when, in spite of the proper paper work and visa, Nina is held for the interrogation as soon as she lands on the airport in Canada. Nina’s disgust for the country and its people is expressed thus: “Rage fills her. Why were people so silent about the humiliations they faced in the West?” (The Immigrant 106) Manju Kapur forthrightly tells her protagonist to: “get rid of the schism, become enough like them to be comfortable, merge and mingle…there is new stuff around, make it your own” (The Immigrant121). Nina is sick of shopping in skyscrapers Malls and abundance of plenty. She is tired of sitting in a cozy and comfortable home, watching television, when in India she had a good academic career. She feels the need to expand her horizon and gratify the inner fires. Manju Kapur expresses the predicament of immigrant wives thus: “When the house and its conveniences can no longer completely charm or compensate. Then she, realizes she is an immigrant for life…Nina cries, feels homesick, sometimes adventurous, often forlorn” (The Immigrant122).

Nina is surprised to find that her husband has completely assimilated in Western culture, whereas she is divided in heart and mind and is constantly reminded of her homeland and its values. She knows it fully well that her home was with her husband, yet she begins to miss every small thing related to India. In the discussions with Ananda, she realized that he has completely absorbed western values. She found him as a man who firmly believes that one’s own merits are more important and that “family and pull do not count” here in the same way as back home in India (The Immigrant 143). Though Nina gradually begins to accommodate herself to some of the western values but she still clings to some of her own back home and refuses to call Ananda as Andy. Her growing sense of alienation makes her realize what it was
to belong because in India she never felt the need of assimilation as, “she had belonged” (The Immigrant 155). Her conflict with Indian values is always there at the back of her mind. She also realized that till she came to Canada, “she hadn’t known what lonely meant. At home one was never really alone” (The Immigrant 159). Ananda takes good care of her so far as material comforts are concerned. He even cooks for her and never forces her to cook non-vegetarian for him. This space that she gets is unheard of Indian husbands back home. Yet this sense of mutuality and personal space being conferred to her soon proves elusive when she comes to know about her husband’s sexual inadequacy. When she married she had thought that, “family, sex and marriage would soon be hers” (The Immigrant 81). But here it was total pain and loneliness. She had no family and friends to discuss her predicament and wished she was home with mother or her friend Zenobia. Ananda who had completely molded himself in Western culture could not understand her hankering for relatives. Although Ananda was different from other men who saw “in the women of the homeland…family makers and standard bearers,” yet, he was lacking in the most significant thing in marriage- sexual performance (The Immigrant 78). His near total impotency leaves Nina wondering whether it was too much to demand healthy sex with the partner. She is torn between her faithfulness to her husband and sexual urges of her body. Her psyche which is ingrained in moral values of Indian culture, craves for sexual compatibility with the life-partner.

Nina tries to divert her sense of autonomy for sexual satisfaction to need for a child because she wanted to fill her life with some purpose living almost lonely life in Canada. She starts craving for a child, for an extension of her own flesh and blood, which would give some meaning to her in the journey of life. Here again one can see Nina representative of the psyche of middle class Indian woman whose journey of married life is essentially tied to motherhood. Ananda, on the other hand, is not interested in a child as he is aware of his sexual inadequacy and also wants to be free from all the debts that he had incurred on his wedding. She makes every effort to convince her husband to see a doctor but he considers it as an assault on his manhood as he had already felt the anxiety of performing in marital relationship. For him marriage was a cover to hide his lack in sexual performance. Ananda’s disinterestedness in child and his impotency tortured her and “tears gathered in her
eyes” (*The Immigrant* 171). Nina now understands that for an immigrant wife, life basically consists in waiting for a husband who is busy all the time in his work. She had come to Canada and looked forward for the freedom, togetherness and security that come with marriage, but this marriage brought only loneliness, hunger for sexual satisfaction and desperation.

Nina longs for Ananda’s companionship and often ponders, “What can one do with a hungry heart?” (*The Immigrant* 129) and her strength of character is exhibited when she refuses to sit down quietly regarding this issue and plans to see the male-gynecologist. She felt independent because, “at least she was doing something about her problem” (*The Immigrant* 168). Back in India, she knew, “she would never have been allowed to do something like this on her own” (*The Immigrant* 168). She could observe clearly that, “Ananda got offensive when he felt attacked” and “it grieved her that Ananda had no notion of how she felt” (*The Immigrant* 178). She is pained at the reduction of her status from the respected post of a professor in Indian University to just being a wife and tries to do away with this alleviated feeling by forging bonds with Ananda’s uncle’s family, Dr. Sharma and his wife Nancy, as “she was keen to set roots” (*The Immigrant* 130) in a foreign country. Her hopes of bonding are nipped in the bud when Ananda tells her, “it’s pointless to think of them as we do of relatives back home” (*The Immigrant* 130). Nina is disheartened and feels helpless contemplating her loneliness, “Was it always going to be like this, just her and Ananda?” (*The Immigrant* 130) She is able to perceive that her hunger for companionship, family bonding and a child is not going to be fulfilled, hence she takes a strong decision to do away with this stereotypical expectation and plunges herself in western values, western style of dressing and food habits. The writer makes a note of it when she writes, “As immigrants fly across oceans they shed their old clothing, because clothes maketh the man and new ones help ease the transition (*The Immigrant* 150).

Nina also understands that “the immigrant who comes as a wife has a more difficult time. If work exists for her; it is in the future and after much finding of feet.” (121) She however comes up with new assumptions as she notes that, “there is new stuff around, make it your own. You have to” (*The Immigrant* 121). Nina also feels a sense of discrimination because of her color and belongingness to a colonized country. She 
expresses her grief when she says, “I am the wrong color; I came from the wrong place” (*The Immigrant* 107). But soon Nina decides for herself to make this pain as an opportunity to be part of the new world. She gets introduced to *La Leache League*, where western women discuss their issues related to husbands, children and even the issues like infertility and barrenness. Nina now realizes that these women enjoyed more autonomy as compared to their eastern counter-parts where closed cultures do not permit such open exhibition of their minds and problems. Nina realizes that she has yet to travel a long road to be autonomous like them and she decides to join Halifax Regional Library as a member and finds a part time job here to fill her time. She felt contented that “she was expanding into Halifax in ways that made her less dependent on her husband” (*The Immigrant* 168). Nina tried to find answers to her problems by reading books and magazines in library on intimate relationships which discussed issues of sexual performance. She tried her best to convince her husband to establish a mutual understanding regarding this relationship, but distance grew between them and she wondered why they were not able to communicate on the basic form of communication. A sense of realization dawned on Nina that his sexual inadequacy was the reason why he came searching for a wife to India. She ruminated, “Was this the kind of man he was? Passing off shoddy stuff to the innocent East?” (*The Immigrant* 184) She feels being used and isolated. She has lost her home and her job. She cries, “I miss home I miss a job I miss doing things. I feel like a shadow. What am I but your wife?” (*The Immigrant* 237)

During her Library Science degree course at a University, Nina is introduced to Beth who was pursuing masters’ degree in library science. A friendship develops between the two and Beth introduces Nina to her Support Group which worked on the feministic principles. The group exposes her to the western notions of liberation, freedom and courage. She voraciously reads many books including *The Second Sex* and *The Female Eunuch* and gets entry into the system. It is now that a woman’s identity and autonomy in an immigrant country and her abiding urge for independent status begins to acquire utmost significance. When Ananda opposes her integration into the group, Nina asserts, “I need to find my feet in the country” (*The Immigrant* 216). The same Nina who had dreamed of a child in her life immediately after landing to Halifax, now speculates, “But was it wise to lose yourself in a child, just because
you had nothing to do…?” (The Immigrant 224) She had been brought up on such values which emphasized on a wife’s sacrifice, her silence and importance of adjustment, but by being an integral part of the group, she could understand the larger connotations of a woman’s individuality.

She realized that “security was not happiness, and neither depended on fertility or a husband’s sexuality” (The Immigrant 224). She even detests the material comforts provided by her husband because she has now begun to see life from a completely different perspective. She questioned herself, “What did material platitudes have to do with inner freedom?” (The Immigrant 226) The purpose of Support Group was to provide perspectives to its members about exploring themselves as it worked on the principle that “it is very important that you know yourself” (The Immigrant 229). The task of self exploration was tough for Nina at times because she felt caught up between her Indian values, her mother’s expectations and her own desires as she had been conditioned to think that a woman’s fulfillment lies in motherhood. But she overcomes this dilemma and tells herself to get a grip on the system of the West and assimilate, as these countries throw open all kinds of choices. She saw her choice in ensuring a job for herself as, “that would give her independence” (The Immigrant 232). She no longer craves for the child and instead shifts her focus on empowering herself in various ways. Nina patted herself as she was taking “steps towards autonomy” (The Immigrant 243) and for the next two years she found herself a part of the student body.

It is here in the Library school that she befriends Anton and felt daring in his company, drinking, smoking and asserting her sexuality. Her conversion, especially her licentiousness, is inevitable while living in the West and she is transformed from a shy Indian girl to being a Canadian in thought and perception. She imbibes what reverberates through Anton, “But it is stupid to confine yourself to one person for your life. What about adventure, what about experiencing differences? Nobody owns anybody, you know” (The Immigrant 263). Nina now has a changed attitude towards sex and is not guilty about it as she would have felt if she lived in India. Rather she considered sex as her “inalienable right” which would provide her with a sense of ‘her own self’. The writer notes: “For the first time she had a sense of her own self, entirely separate from other people, autonomous, independent” (The Immigrant 260).
However such autonomy in matters related to her body proves short lived, as Anton too tried to use her and even stoops down to assaulting her. She decides not to allow him to ruin her life and leaves him once for all. She now turns into a fighter who has abandoned both Ananda and Anton as an act of protest. She is again confused whether to stay in Canada or return to India after she discovers Ananda’s infidelity. A return for her is impossible because she does not want to lose that respect and honour which she had gained in her former world. Her visit to India after her mother’s death made it clear to her that she no longer belonged to this society and culture and she also looked at the pain and struggle that she had undergone to imbibe Canadian life and its culture. Her return to India would mean new adjustments and new struggle. She has lost her mother and lost Ananda on account of his infidelity. It is now that reality sinks on her, “You have to be your own anchor” (The Immigrant 328) and having understood the truth, Nina finds no reason to return back to her native country since any place on earth is now same for her. Thus the woman in her is able to find a space in personal as well as social sphere in spite of, “the difficulties, the pain, the solitude” (The Immigrant 333).

Her decision to stay back confirms Ananda’s uncle assertion at one time in the novel, “one should take the best of one’s country and leave” (The Immigrant 136). Nina is thus an immigrant for life as she has not only reinvented herself but has become Canadian to the best of her capacity. Besides she now heads for the job in the University of New Brunswick and life seems to be promising ahead, one yet to be explored. There is nothing to hold her back now, “Perhaps that was the ultimate immigrant experience… For an immigrant there was no going back...When one was reinventing oneself, anywhere could be home. Pull up your shallow roots and move. Find a new place, new friends, a new home” (The Immigrant 334). Thus, in the context of an immigrant wife, the writer tends to transform the meaning of home so as to present the whole world as a ‘global village’ where a woman has constantly to ‘reinvent’ and reassert herself through availing all kinds of new opportunities and relationships in an attempt to establish her roots and affirm her identity in an independent and autonomous manner.

Likewise, An American Brat is a novel of ‘cultural clashes, and the adjustments and compromises’ that any young woman who decides to settle in America, is required to
make. Bapsi Sidhwa here traces the journey of a young girl Feroza from being a child with narrow-minded streak to a mature and highly sensitized and emancipated female who could break away from her cocoon and fly like a bird on the western horizon in one of the most developed part of the land, America. Sidhwa confesses in an interview to Naila Hussain that:

The book deals with the subject of ‘cultural shock’, young people from the subcontinent have to contend with when they choose to study abroad. It also delineates the clashes of divergent cultures generated between the families ‘back home’ and their transformed and transgressing progeny bravely groping their way in the New World. (1993)

Feroza belongs to a Parsi community and a retrogressive Pakistani society with its stern Islamic laws. Though her family is progressive in outlook and life style, yet the cumulative environment has left Feroza as a girl with narrow perceptions. Zareen, Feroza’s mother and a woman activist who works in numerous organizations fighting for the lot of women in Pakistani society, suggests Feroza to be sent to America for a holiday with her uncle Manek, with a belief that “travel will broaden her outlook” (Sidhwa, An American Brat 14). Feroza was a stubborn child from the beginning who refuses to attend parties thrown by her parents and would spend time reading in her room locked from inside. Feroza’s grandmother, Khutlibai, questions Feroza being sent to America since she felt that Feroza is, “too innocent and young to be there” (An American Brat 30) and reproaches Zareen for setting a bad example in encouraging Feroza to go abroad and hence expose to western influences. Feroza is advised by the elderly ladies through the last minute instructions at the airport not to “talk to strangers, and never ever look into their eyes!” (An American Brat 50)

While in America, Feroza is excited at the idea of her own money, her own career and her own identity. She begins to exercises her autonomy of thought and perceptions at the very beginning of her landing in America. She is not bowed down by the inquisitive immigrant officers and challenges to go back to her country if not treated nicely. When she finds that these officers were too offensive in their conduct, she yells at them, “To hell with you and your damn country. I’ll go back!” (An American Brat 64) However Manek’s entreaties softened the attitude of the officers and she was permitted to enter America. Though initially embarrassed, but equally fascinated by
an altogether different culture, she assimilates her experience and finds that people here were “busy with their own concerns, none of them around her bothered to glance her way or stare at her... It was a heady feeling to be suddenly so free for the moment, at least, of thousand constraints that governed her life” (An American Brat 73). Exposed to American culture, Feroza grew appallingly unabashed and Manek found her, “disrespectful and un-niece like before his friend” (An American Brat 99).

Family, believes Bapsi, plays an important role in supporting each other as does Manek, once Feroza is in America. He visualized that her immigration from her home country, “involved not only Feroza’s education and the development of her personality but also her induction into the self-sufficient, industrious and independent way of American life” (An American Brat 119). Being genuinely concerned about evolving the ways and means through which Feroza could constructively utilize the various ‘opportunities and choices’ available to her in America, he plans to ensure her longer stay through her admission to a hotel management degree from American University and advises her to work hard if she wants “to be independent and enjoy the good life” (An American Brat 124).

Feroza was admitted to Twin falls Idaho, which offered a stipend to cover tuition fees and would also ease her, “assimilation into the American way of life” (An American Brat 138). At Twin falls, Feroza, in the company of her roommate Jo, learns to drink, eat meat, socializing with boys and picks up using words like “shit” and “assholes” that “epitomized for her the heady reality of her being abroad”( An American Brat 159). Drinking heavily at times, Feroza visualized what her family would have to say to this sea-change in her. She gradually absorbs the cultural shock and emerges out a changed person. B.R Agarwal observation in this regard is pertinent:

Feroza who has travelled miles in search of the freedom and emancipation, begins to assimilate the independence of mind and spirit and sturdy confidence offered by the New World which is alien to her ‘Third World’ experience and sheltered up-bringing. (185)

Manek introduces her to Father Fibbs, a spiritual figure that encouraged students and told them about the intricacies of life. Sidhwa makes Father Fibs her mouth-piece and points out that the process of assimilation is painful in the beginning but the immigrants are able to assimilate in a foreign culture up to a considerable degree after
a period of time and it could turn out to be an opportunity of empowerment. Feroza speculates, “Might not she, too, wish to prove herself? Even if she was only a girl? Explore possibilities that were beginning to palpitate and twinkle as yet unrecognizable- on evanescent new horizons” (An American Brat 116). It is Sidhwa’s firm belief that, “once you’re no longer afraid to fall, away you’ll soar-up, up to where there is no fall!” (An American Brat 117) Feroza exhibits this daring spirit in trying to assimilate her in American culture. No longer contented to be a shy, conservative girl of Pakistan who would be upset by her mother’s modern way of dressing up, she now discovers the ecstasy of being a free woman and relishes in carrying herself up like an American girl, though at night she performs the holy rituals of kusti and asks for forgiveness to the holy fire – the traditional symbol of Ahura Mazda. She learnt to drive according to American traffic rules and was jubilant at getting the license.

Jo helped her understand America and its exotic culture along with the freedom and active rights that it provided to its individuals. Feroza, thinking of couples making love in Harvard Square, concentrates on the extra-ordinary possibilities that American culture provided and ponders, “Might not she, too, wish to prove herself?”(An American Brat 117) Jo and Feroza decide to switch to University of Denver because they wanted to explore more, Idaho being a small town. It was a heady feeling for Feroza to be taking her own decisions and living alone with Jo outside the university campus in an independent flat. The earlier introvert and conservative Feroza now turns into a self-assured and self-assertive girl. She begins to flirt with an Indian student Shashi who introduced her to his circle of Asian friends. The writer describes this journey as, “Something locked within Feroza opened up, allowing her access to happier places within herself … and it was first time Feroza found her-self making friends on her own, without Jo… that her life would bloom- now affirmed”(An American Brat 215). Socializing with boys, her expenditure increased and she did not want to write back home. So she decides to take up small jobs to meet the expenses and at times was even ready to be waitress, which was unthinkable in Pakistan. But within the, “heady climate of her freedom in America, she felt able to do anything” (An American Brat 216). She changed her dressing style and took to wearing shorts and jeans, which was appreciated by her new roommates Rhonda and Gwen who
“assured her that she just looked great” (*An American Brat* 216). Feroza has no hitch now dancing with Shashi and other boys and learnt to have, “more accommodating views of the relationship between men and women” (*An American Brat* 226). When she was alone with Shashi, they kissed and patted each other but there was nothing sexual between them because both being from the South Asian countries were bound by their restricting customs. This restraint was also supported by “taboos that governed the behavior of decent unmarried girls and of desi men” (*An American Brat* 230).

Feroza decided to spend her term holidays in Lahore and was welcomed warmly by the waiting family. As soon as she landed in Lahore, she could perceive the drastic change that had come over her grandparents. To her they, “looked significantly older” because now her concept of age had changed (*An American Brat* 235). She had seen people in seventies quite athletic in America. Khutlibai, who often came to meet her, could at once notice Feroza’s vibrant face and “saw life and intelligence shining in her face…more than might be good for her granddaughter” (*An American Brat* 235). Zareen too was astonished to see the striking change in Feroza and pondered, “Was this… the same timid little thing that had refused to answer the phone?” (*An American Brat* 236)

Her lessons of freedom in America come handy when she categorically rejects her mother’s suggestion to get married and settle down in the midst of her studies, “How can I give up my studies at this point Mum?” (*An American Brat* 239) Feroza tells them firmly that she did not “want to be at the mercy of my husband” and also insists that if she has a career, she can “earn her living, and he will respect me more” (*An American Brat* 240). Zareen could gauze the extent of the influence American culture had on her daughter and also understood the confidence generated by Feroza’s control over her life. When in Pakistan, Feroza could make clear distinction of the positive and negative aspects of a free culture. She met her friends who had settled down in life and talked of babies and husbands only- the issues which did not interest her. She felt, “she had grown in different ways. Her consciousness included many things they had no concept of” (*An American Brat* 238). She was “disconcerted to discover that she was a misfit in a society in which she had once fitted so well” (*An American Brat* 239). Feroza also registered the subtle changes in the behavior of Zareen when
dealing with her daughter, her choice of words and weariness that reflected on her face. Feroza now, “absorbing the undercurrent at some hidden level of her consciousness, found her sense of dislocation deepens” (An American Brat 239).

Promising to marry after her graduation, Feroza flies back to America never to return. Her transformation reaches its climax when she meets David Press, a young Jew and the passionate love-affair between the two made her feel that “she had taken a leap across some cultural barrier” (An American Brat 251). She found in him a person, “with whom she could communicate even without speech, who could understand the sensitive nuances of her emotions” (An American Brat 255). They often made love to each other and as David, “released her from the baffling sexual limbo…both were intrigued by the otherness of the other” (An American Brat 256). When she told Manek about her love interest and intention to marry, he tried to guide her saying, “it seems all wonderful now, but marriage is something else: our cultures are very different” (An American Brat 263). When David’s house was vacated by the two girls living there, Feroza moved in and, “her living in the same house with David did affect the level of their intimacy” (An American Brat 263). Feroza, at times, suffered bouts of guilt and wondered if she was the same girl who lived in Lahore and gone to convent school.

Her decision to marry David Press ignoring “the religious differences” since they “did not matter so much in America” again invited the wrath of the family back home in Pakistan. Zareen, who was handled the responsibility to tackle Feroza, sets out to dissuade her rebellious daughter from marrying a non-Parsi because she feels that this marriage would result into a kind of cultural suicide. Zareen is aware that a Parsi girl marrying outside the faith is expelled from the Zoroastrian religious community. However the same law does not apply to Parsi men. After reaching America, Feroza tells her mother that she loves David, Zareen roared up, “Love? Love comes after marriage”(An American Brat 279). Her mother, greatly infuriated, repents the decision of sending her to America, “I should have listened. I shall never have let you go so far away. Look what it’s done to you—you have become an American brat!” (An American Brat 279) Zareen adopts all kinds of tricks to dissuade her from this marriage saying that her life “will be dry. Just husband, wife, and may be a child rattling like huge stones in this huge America” (An American Brat 278). Feroza,
unfazed by all her sentimentality, declares that, “I’m only getting married. If the family wants to feel disgraced, let them!” (An American Brat 279). However ultimately Zareen is able to cause a rift between the two by using her rituals in such strange ways that it frightened David out of his wits and after discussing things with Feroza, he moves out of her life forever. Zareen goes back to Pakistan and Feroza refuses to return to her homeland. She felt that her life that had bloomed in such unpredicted ways had just unexpectedly spaced out. Her inner strength is seen in her resolve to put life together again: “She must put it together again, heal her lacerated sensibility. But she could only do the healing right here, in America...She knew there was no going back for her” (An American Brat 311). As Imitiaz and Ali observe:

Taking Foucault’s notion of power as an intricate web she subtly points out how the women exercise agency through their geographical and social locations. Feroza decides to stay in the U.S, instead of going back to her country, because she believed that it is empowering for her. (106)

Feroza’s decision to stay at Denver and never to go back to her home-country reflects tremendous growth in her character to face even the most shattering events of her life with courage and equanimity. She is no longer interested in the things that concern her family and friends and has become used to the comforts that America has offered. Moreover, she realizes that the constraints prevalent in her home country would “crush her freedom that had become central to her happiness. The abandon with which she could conduct her life without interference was possible only because of the distance from her family and the anonymity America provided” (An American Brat 312). She knew that back home in Pakistan, she would always have to deal with the meddling family and relatives who would “never allow her control over her life…and privacy, she had come to realize” (An American Brat 312). She thought she would quench her thirst for knowledge by opting for a branch like psychology, journalism or anthropology. She knew there were ‘endless options’ in America and she could also fight against injustice wherever she was because she had been aware of the political and state evils in Pakistan from her youth. She is well aware of the Hadood Ordinances and its implications that allowed the victims of the rape to be punished. She detested the fundamental Islamic laws that curbed the freedom of its natives in Pakistan. She also thought of the numerous constraints that would govern
her life once she is in her own country and restrict her freedom, “a freedom that had become central to her happiness” (*An American Brat* 312). Indira Bhatt makes a pertinent observation with regard to this:

She has decided to chart out her own cultural heritage, journeying through the Pakistani Islamic culture and western culture of America. Hers will be a new way of life, her personal religion intact coupled with the western freedom to choose her life style. (98)

Having taken a firm decision to stay back in America, Feroza applied for a graduate degree in anthropology at University of Arizona and visited Manek and his wife Aban, who had been urging her to stay with them for a few days. She knew that perhaps someday she might like somebody enough to marry and was clear that, “It wouldn’t matter if he was a Parsee or of another faith. She would be surer of herself and wouldn’t let anyone interfere” (*An American Brat* 317). She had enough faith in her capabilities and could dream that, “may be one day she’d soar to that self-contained place from which there was no falling, if there was such a place” (*An American Brat* 317). This resolve points towards her autonomous state. Sidhwa presents a positive picture of a sense of loss as Feroza resolves to carve out her self-identity in an alien land with renewed confidence and self-awareness.
Works Cited


