CHAPTER III
Dialectics of Desire and Freedom in Sobti’s Narratives

This chapter examines the dialectics of desire and freedom as experienced by Sobti’s protagonists who represent the privileged section of society. There is no place in society for their desires. The expression of sexual desire by a woman of a noble family both before and after marriage is considered an offence in any civilized society. Mitro in *Mitro Marjani* is the daughter-in-law of a middle-class family and Ratti in *Surajmukhi Andhere Ke* is the only daughter of her parents who command a respectable position in society. The belongingness of these two women to a particular section of society imposes upon them a particular code of conduct which they refuse to follow unquestioningly. Their beings come into direct confrontation with their social roles which poses a challenge to the foundations of the social structure. Their sexual assertion is, in fact, a manifestation of their existential crisis, their desire for the totality of being. Had it been a desire for physical pleasure only, then Mitro would have stayed with her mother instead of going to her husband at the end of the narrative. Similarly Ratti, too, would have easily entered into sexual union with the males she comes into contact before meeting Diwakar. But it is not so which means that sexual desire or desire for physical pleasure, which is looked down upon in the society, is the manifestation of a basic human desire i.e. desire to relate to others because it is only in relation to the other that an individual finds the meaning of his own existence. It implies that the fundamental desire at the root of all desires is the desire to find co-incidence with oneself by filling the nothingness of existence. This dialectics between existential freedom and social suppression in these narratives has also been analyzed within the framework of Sartrean existentialism. Emphasizing the importance of the Other Sartre says, “In order to get any truth about myself, I must have contact with another person. The Other is indispensable to my own existence as well as to my knowledge about myself” (*Existentialism and Human Emotions* 38). This desire for physical satisfaction is not an end in itself but a means to find the foundation of one’s own being by possessing the other person as a freedom. This fundamental desire to exist finds expression through different concrete desires. Desire to love and desire to be loved are the two empirical expressions of the abstract desire to be. Ratti’s refusal to marry Diwakar shows that her union with Diwakar is only a concrete manifestation of her more abstract desire to unite Ratti with Ratti (herself with herself).
i.e. desire to achieve a totality of being. It is in their external clashes with the other characters that Mitro and Ratti shape themselves from within and are transformed into themselves.

I. Mitro Marjani

Mitro Marjani, Krishna Sobti’s most celebrated fictional work which came out in 1967 is hailed today as a modern classic. It shocked the contemporary literary world because of its unhesitant expression of desire of a married woman. It is the story of a family, of an old couple Gurudas and Dhanwanti living with their three sons and daughters-in-law: the eldest son Banwari and his second wife Suhagwanti, the second one Sardari and his wife Sumitrawanti, fondly called Mitro; and the youngest son Gulzari and his wife Phulanwanti called Phulan. In the family the new members i.e. the daughters-in-law bring with them not only different family backgrounds but different desires also which present a clash with the existing value-structure. The structure of the narrative is so complex that it can be interpreted in many ways but the most controversial concern in it has always been the theme of acceptance versus assertion. Mitro, the protagonist in the narrative, asserts herself as an individual instead of silently accepting the subordinate position of a wife. The existential assertion is the result of the dialectics of desire and freedom which pose a challenge to the existing social structure.

About her experience of writing such a narrative Krishna Sobti says:

The author had nothing preplanned while writing it out. The story revealed itself automatically and laid bare layer after layer. The waves and strides of the body and mind, love and entreaties, quarrels and fictions all got entwined in the rhythm and musical pattern of the household. . . . a family, a world in itself. But no family is complete in itself just by its existence. The inherent earthquakes keep on rocking its structure, foundations and beams. When an earthquake erupts in the form of Mitro, it is bound to develop into the fiction Mitro Marjani. (“Author’s Integrity is Supreme” 73)

Mitro is a woman of flesh and blood who is highly complex in her transparency but very blunt in her behaviour. She does not spare anybody including her husband. She openly proclaims Sardari’s inability to satisfy her sexually which becomes a cause of tension between them, but instead of enjoying physical pleasure available at her mother’s house, she chooses to live with her husband which is considered the victory of traditional family system. But things are not as simple as they appear to be. The focus of the narrative is neither a rebellion against patriarchy
nor a sexual assertion against social suppression. Had it been a simple story beginning with the sexual-cravings of a married woman and ending with her silent submission to social norms, the volcano which erupted in the form of Mitro would not have developed into the fiction *Mitro Marjani* and her personal conflict would not have become a universal issue.

The issue which raises Mitro’s story to the level of universal concern is the issue of existential assertion which has always been narrowed down by the critics to the problem of sexual expression only. Mitro’s consciousness of her body and sex is the concrete manifestation of her consciousness of her freedom. Her refusal to accept the traditional definition of a wife becomes a threat to the traditional family system which is the foundation of any civilized society. Her actions appear defiant only in relation to the conventional behaviour of the other daughters-in-law in the family. The understanding of the other characters is also very important to comprehend the character of Mitro. So this analysis aims at understanding Mitro in relation to the other family members and in different situations in the narrative.

The three young couples in the narrative: Banwari and Suhag; Sardari and Mitro; and Gulzari and Phulan present three types of subject-object relationships. Their first appearances in the narrative give us a peep into their consciousness which help us in understanding the type of beings they are and their relationships with other persons. The youngest daughter-in-law Phulan appears when Dhanwanti is preparing milk for Gurudas:

But as she (Dhanwanti) started pouring back and forth into two jugs, to make it frothy, the youngest daughter-in-law came and stood by in the entrance of the kitchen. She looked sharply at her mother-in-law and said, “Mother, if you are going to pour the milk for making curds, then use the fresh curd, yesterday’s curd was sour.” Dhanwanti’s hands stopped midway. She felt like giving her a piece of her mind, but controlled herself. Why should she lower herself to that girl’s level. (Krishna Sobti, *Mitro Marjani* 9)

Then Mitro is introduced in the narrative as a defiant wife:

Like a mad woman, with disheveled hair, the middle one was trying to free her hand from Sardari’s grip. And Sardari, clad only in a loincloth, was slapping her ruthlessly.

For a moment Dhanwanti, dumbfounded, kept on staring at them. And when she regained her senses, she shouted, “Sardari!”

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5 The subsequent references from the text have been cited with page numbers written in parenthesis.
Sardari did not heed her. He gave her one more smack and said, “Will you lower your gaze or not?”
But the middle one of her daughters-in-law did not do anything of that sort. She continued challenging her man with her big brown eyes. (12)
The third daughter-in-law Suhag appears when Dhanwanti calls Banwari for help:
The elder son Banwari, cast a glance at his younger brother’s wife and in an authoritative voice called out to his own wife, “Suhag! Take the middle one to your room.” And he himself went up to Sardari.
Getting her mother-in-law sit on the bed, Suhag drew two settees to it and holding her sister-in-law’s hand lovingly she said, “Mitro, my dear sister, till this evening you were all joy and laughter. Now what . . .? (13)
These three extracts from the text present before us three types of individuals. The youngest one Phulan is in conflict with her mother-in-law. Her commanding attitude reflects her desire for authority in the house but instead of being elevated to an authoritative position she degrades herself in the eyes of her in-laws. Because of her disrespectful behaviour she is not considered even worth talking to by Dhanwanti. Mitro, the protagonist, is in conflict with her husband. She is thrashed by him every day but instead of conceding defeat she counter attacks him with her gaze which signifies her desire for assertion. In spite of her adamant attitude she is loved by her mother-in-law and Suhag. And the eldest one, Suhag has no conflict with anybody. She obeys her husband, respects the elder members of the family and loves the younger ones which illustrate her desire to present herself as an ideal wife and daughter-in-law.
These first impressions help in characterizing Phulan as quarrelsome, Mitro as defiant, and Suhag as submissive but their particular characters are not something given at the time of birth rather they have deliberately made themselves so because “a man is nothing else but what he makes of himself” (Sartre, Existentialism and Human Emotions 15). They are not so by birth but by their choice. The choices they have made defined their beings. All of the three were born free and they were free even to decide whether they wanted to accept their freedom or not. The most popular way to flee one’s existential freedom is to hold somebody else responsible for one’s own choices which Phulan uses to avoid the anxiety caused by her decisions to go back to her parental house. She is proud of the wealthy parents and wants to live with them instead of her in-laws but she lacks courage to bear the responsibility of this decision. So she pretends as if she
has been exploited by her in-laws to the extent that she is forced to leave that place and go to her parental home. Not only she blames them of torturing her but also grabs their money by provoking her husband to deceive his brothers in business. She herself feigns illness to prove her innocence and become the focus of attention. Her plan works successfully as all the family members are taken in by her drama but she fails to deceive Mitro as she has the power to see through her plans. One morning Suhag comes hurriedly to Mitro and tells her, “Go and quickly have your bath. The younger bride is not feeling well. I’ll look after the cleaning of the house and you take care of the kitchen” (22). When Mitro does not trust her she tells her again, “Phulanwanti really has an attack of hysteria today. Her whole body has gone stiff like wood” (23). Like an obedient husband Gulzari rubs her palms gently and is really worried about her. When Mitro taunts him with being too foolish to see through his wife’s intentions, Phulan starts crying convulsively to make her husband accede to the truth of her illness. Looking at Gulzari she says, “Oh! I am not going to survive this fatal illness! Oh, someone go and call the doctor!” (24). When Phulan realizes that Mitro would not let her plan work, she gets off her bed suddenly and adopts a different strategy:

For once she looked at her husband with flaming eyes, then started banging her head against the arm of the bed and wailing aloud “I know it all! The jealous ones do not even let me live in peace. They have an eye on my ornaments. Yes I know. . . . Now see for yourself, how they are tearing and devouring me bit by bit! Till today I have been patient but now listen carefully, now I’ll not leave my jewellery with them. (27)

Suhag gives her jewellery but Mitro does not let her give her clothes to Phulan which were given to her (Suhag) at the time of her marriage. Phulan leaves no stone unturned in provoking Gulzari against his family. At last her drama reaches its zenith when one day Gulzari enters his own house with the platoon of Phulan’s brothers and tells Dhanwanti, “Mother, your daughter-in-law can’t adjust herself any more in this house” (58) and he moves along with Phulan to her parental house where her desire for luxury is fulfilled at last. Her act of proving herself innocent in front of her brothers and their wives projects her as an unauthentic being who wants to escape her freedom. By presenting herself as a victim at the hands of her in-laws, she emotionally victimizes them. Phulan’s mother Mayawanti is not ignorant of the real situation but instead of rebuking her for her wrong decision she helps her in maintaining the mask of a victim
in front of her daughters-in-law (Phulan’s sisters-in-law) whom she hesitates to face. “With cautious eyes, she looked at her brothers’ apartments to see if their wives were around and then whispered into her mother’s ear, ‘Mother, you tackle those two chatter-boxes. I can’t handle them’” (60). This fear of facing them is the result of her anguish caused by the realization of her responsibility for creating a different image of a daughter-in-law and a wife because “when we say that man chooses his own self, we mean that every one of us does likewise; but we also mean by that in making this choice he also chooses all men” (Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* 17). Phulan wants to flee the disturbing thought that her sisters-in-law can also behave the same way with her mother as she has behaved with her mother-in-law. This reduces her being to the being-in-itself.

The eldest daughter-in-law Suhag is a complete contrast to Phulan. She is an ideal daughter-in-law and a perfect wife. She has completely devoted herself to the service of her in-laws. Her only desire is to keep her family members happy. She takes care of the needs of not only her husband but all the members of the family. Banwari and Suhag have a conventional husband-wife relationship. Banwari’s word is not less than God’s word for her. She is always at his beck and call. In the beginning of the narrative, obeying Banwari she not only takes Mitro along with her but also tries to calm her down lovingly.

The middle one looked at the older one with challenging eyes, and then, untying her plaited hair, started throwing the clips away.

Suhag picked up a comb from the niche in the wall and sat behind Mitro. She straightened her tangled hair with comb and plaited again.

A heavy load went off Dhanwanti’s breast. The good hearted mate of Banwari is really an intelligent girl. (13-14)

She performs all the household chores from cleaning the house to preparing food. She takes special care of her father-in-law and mother-in-law which makes her very dear to them and she secures a very special place both in the house and in their heart. One day when Banwari returns home from his workplace he finds Suhag serving lunch to her father-in-law:

She drew the veil over her eyes in deference and served the father standing beside him. Then she collected the utensils, helped him to wash his hands and mouth. Then presented him some dried grapes tied in the corner of her sari.

Gurudas blessed her, “Long live daughter! May you attain bliss and happiness!”
When she reached the threshold, he called her again, “Daughter Suhagwanti, could there ever be a price for you service? I am sure me and my wife must have done some good deed in our previous birth to be blessed with such a good daughter-in-law like you” (37-38)

In the same way, she takes care of her mother-in-law more than her real mother:

Suhag took off the *parantha* and putting it in the plate said remonstratingly, “Yet father is busy in his routine, mother. But if you won’t eat, I too would observe a fast.”

When Dhanwanti took a morsel off, her eyes got moist. This daughter of someone else is so much concerned with my well being. (68-69)

Suhag is not greedy for jewellery like Phulan. Her instant decision to give her jewellery illustrates her desire to maintain happiness and peace in the family. Suhag fulfills the aim of marriage by being in the family way which makes her even more admirable and respectable in the family. Dhanwanti is very happy to listen to this news. She asks Banwari to get a pair of earrings made for Suhag. She herself takes milk for her at night and massages her legs and shoulders.

Suhag enjoys a respectable position in the home not because she herself has created some values which have earned her respect but because she follows a code of conduct already existing in the society meaning of which is ‘respectability’. While explaining the so-called respectable position of the bourgeoise, Sartre says:

> The bourgeois who call themselves “respectable citizens” do not become respectable as the result of contemplating moral values. Rather from the moment of their arising in the world they are thrown into a pattern of behaviour the meaning of which is respectability. Thus respectability acquires a being; it is not put into question. *(Being and Nothingness* 62).

Suhag is Banwari’s second wife and both Sardari and Gulzari had been married before Banwari’s second marriage. That is why she is called ‘new’ in the house but she is more serious and responsible than the other two. In fact, seriousness is nothing but a part of the role of an ideal wife and daughter-in-law. Instead of creating her own values by exercising her freedom, Suhag just conforms to an already existing pattern because it saves her from ethical anguish. Paradoxically her sincerity, which is the most valuable asset of an ideal married woman, is the biggest proof of her unauthenticity. She is a sincere wife, sincere daughter-in-law and sincere
sister-in-law but this sincerity is not a state but an obligation. Suhag is not so by birth rather she has learnt this art of becoming good wife and daughter-in-law after her marriage through constantly fulfilling the expectation of her in-laws and by staying within the limits of her social roles which implies that she has ‘become’ sincere through her constant efforts. The possibility of changing or challenging the already existing social order is always open to her but her adoption of the image of an ideal woman signifies her rejection of the other possibilities of her life which entail anxiety and responsibility. This rejection means deliberately reducing oneself to the passive position of a being-in-itself or a thing as “at the base of sincerity a continual game of mirror and reflection, a perpetual passage from the being which is what it is, to the being which is not what it is and inversely from the being which is not what it is to the being which is what it is” (Sartre, Being and Nothingness 89). She puts efforts in maintaining the mask of sincerity.

When Mitro makes fun of Phulan’s illness, “Suhag felt like laughing aloud. But she maintained her composure and asked her lovingly, “Get up my sister and take bath quickly” ” (23). Seriousness is an attitude to define oneself in terms of the world. It is the world, and not his consciousness, which is the source of the values of a serious person. Once on being asked by Dhanwanti, Suhag says that Mitro’s lustful heart is the cause of all the conflicts but the very next moment she doubts her words. She hesitatingly tells Dhanwanti, “I’ve happened to pass a judgement on the middle one but now I feel, mother, who am I to pass judgement on anybody else” (85). She is afraid of the consequences of her words so she quickly withdraws her remarks because “the serious man at the bottom is hiding from himself the consciousness of his freedom; he is in bad faith and his bad faith aims at presenting himself to his own eyes as a consequence; everything is a consequence for him, and there is never any beginning. That is why he is so concerned with the consequences of his acts” (Being and Nothingness 601). This is the reason that in spite of all her goodness Suhag fails to grab the central position in the narrative.

Mitro, the middle daughter-in-law of the family, is a complete contrast to both Suhag and Phulan. She neither conforms to the already existing value system of the society like Suhag nor shifts the responsibility of the rejection of this system to anybody else like Phulan. She is not sexually submissive wife like Suhag. In fact, opposite to it, she openly expresses her sexual needs and her husband’s inability to satisfy her needs. It is her sexual assertion which has always been questioned and discussed by the literary critics but focusing the whole attention on just one aspect of her personality would result in only partial analysis of her character. She is not a
combination of body and mind but a whole being, not a material object only but an organic totality in situation. She is the daughter of a well-known courtesan of the region and there are subtle references in the text hinting at her own involvement in that profession but after marriage she finds herself in an altogether new world. The value system at her in-laws’s house is completely opposite to her mother’s house. It is only with respect to this situation that Mitro’s choices and acts can be analyzed.

In Hindu society the aim of marriage is procreation not pleasure where female body is considered just a means for continuing family lineage. But contrary to it female body is everything in the world of courtesans. The bodily beauties and desires are a matter of pride not of shame for them. Mitro, who is born and brought up in such an environment of physical freedom, unhesitatingly expresses her love for the beauty and sexual appeal of her own body. After Mitro’s clash with Sardari at night, Suhag takes Mitro to her room and asks her to sleep peacefully. But instead of sleeping Mitro takes off all her clothes and laughingly says to Suhag:

Banwari says, “Mitro, your body is sheer gold and honey . . . pure gold and honey!” and I tell that good-for-nothing man . . . Oh you! In this very milk and honey writhe the serpents of your desires!

. . . covering her breasts with her hands, she said self-absorbingly, “tell the truth, elder one, has anyone got such breasts?”

Suhagwanti felt hot all over. Leaving her bed, she came to Mitro and slapping her forehead with both palms, said disgustingly, “You strayed one! Once dead, no one will ever know whether you had ever! So much pride of this continuously dissolving body! Curse on you! Swarthy and ugly women like you are in every home. They too have two arms, two legs, two eyes and two breasts too like yours. Are you the only one blessed with these female organs?

The middle one shamelessly stretched out her arms, “I bow to this virtuous wife of my brother-in-law. Sister-in-law, tell my brother-in-law, that as long as Mitro has this heavenly gift, Mitro will not die.” (18)

Here Suhag represents the traditional Hindu thought about the insignificance of female body in marriage system whereas Mitro represents the individual perspective about it. Indian philosophy is dualistic in nature as it divides an individual into body and soul. It regards body as perishable and, thus, desire for physical gratification is considered a sin which deviates human
beings from their real aim of life which is the attainment of moksha. The cause of all the worldly miseries is the glorification of body. The aim of life should be spiritual bliss not physical pleasure. Sexual desire is considered the basest of all the physical desires. In order to regulate this destructive desire every society develops certain institutions and marriage is one such social institution. It restrains the sexual cravings of human beings by associating it with the aim of procreation rather than with bodily pleasures. The body is looked upon not as an end in itself but just as a means to attain spiritual bliss. But Mitro is not able to reconcile with this system of thought. She considers body a concrete reality which cannot be ignored. According to Sartrean existentialism human being is manifested to the other as a body, and body is the necessary way in which an individual exists his contingency. It is the other who makes the self conscious of its body.

Like Suhag, Banwari, too, is an embodiment of the norms and values which are considered the base of traditional family system. His relationship with Mitro should be beyond the considerations of body as he is her husband’s elder brother which implies he should have a brotherly relationship with Mitro too. But contrary to this social expectation, they encounter each other as bodies. There are four such references in the text which makes Banwari-Mitro relationship doubtful. Firstly, in the very beginning Mitro tells Suhag that Banwari says, “Mitro, your body is sheer gold and honey . . . pure gold and honey!” (18). Banwari’s these words make her even more conscious of her physical beauty. Then secondly, when on seeing Banwari, Mitro playfully pulls down her head-covering a bit on her face and says, “respected brother-in-law, I am no match to my sister-in-law but you may care to cast a little glance at me too” (22). Thirdly, when Suhag tells her that her father-in-law and brother-in-law are angry over her behaviour and want to talk to her, Mitro could not hide her happiness at the mention of Banwari’s name. “With dancing eyes, she said pinchingly to Suhag, ‘Sister-in-law, that prince is the darling of your heart. Otherwise I would have seen all his antics and powers’” (32). And once she wears make-up but does not find anybody to praise her, she feels, “Would that Banwari could see me in this make-up!” (41). These references raise doubt on the ideal image of Banwari, and his relation with Mitro. Gurudas’s reaction when he sees Mitro sitting in front of Banwari and Sardari without covering her head provides us with a clue to understand this complexity of relationships. “Gurudas started shivering with anger. ‘I will deal with your unworthy sons afterwards, Dhanwanti! But what the hell is your daughter-in-law doing here sitting bare-headed amongst
these devils?” (16). Gurudas’s words emphasize the basic Sartrean thesis that individuals appear to each other first of all as bodies and the basic relation between two individuals is that of the self and the other. Thus the fundamental desire is “the desire to appropriate a body as this appropriation reveals to me my body as flesh” (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 411). Thus the two beings exists as bodies initially with the desire to incarnate one’s own body by coming into the contact of the other body but this desire of the body is suppressed under the codes of social relationships which delimits the scope of desire. As Banwari is the elder brother of Mitro’s husband and this relationship proscribes them to see each other as bodies. The social code of conduct demands of Mitro, who exists in the concrete as body which is the necessary characteristics of our contingent existence, to exist at an abstract level without assigning any value to her body. She is unable to fulfill this demand as it is ontologically contradictory because human being is neither only body nor something which is beyond body. A being-for-itself exists as a body but body in situation. This situation is characterized by an individual’s place of birth, his past, his body and his position in the world. Her situation is altogether different from that of Phulan and Suhag. When Suhag asks her how did she get into these bad ways, the reason she gives is her different situation:

Mitro felt no hesitation. Lying down still, she replied, “Reliever, like the seven sacred rivers, black as the frying pan’s bottom, is the mother of mine and she gave birth to me, a milky fair girl! She says that I resemble the renowned and powerful Tehsildar of the area. Now you tell me, the elder one, how am I to find virtues as fine as yours? Your brother-in-law does not understand this secret burning of my body. . . . now I cannot do with weekly or fortnightly meetings . . . and this body of mine is so thirsty, so hungry, that I writhe all the time like a fish out of water”. Suhagwanti kept on gaping at her with eyes wide open as if she had been seeing her for the first time. Shaking her head she muttered in a faint voice, “Middle one, your mother has not done any good by deceiving these people.” Then she felt blood rushing to her face, “Sister, for women the boundary line is only the norms of the family. If she happens to transgress it even by mistake . . .” (20)

Mitro is born at a place where a girl enjoys a privileged position only because of her body, where body is placed above all the other things, where the highest value is attached to the body. Mitro’s birth is the result of the play of the bodies. After birth she is brought up in an
environment where a woman is not asked to hide the beauties of her body but to celebrate these
to the most. She is born in the environment of free sex, brought up there and on reaching the
prime of her youth she herself get immersed in the same way of life. It is hinted at many places
in the text. First of all, her dreaming about Nayamat, then reference of Nihala by Banwari, and
then the comments she receives while crossing the street to go to her mother’s house mirror her
past life. Her present situation is different because now she is a legally married woman but it
does not mean that she has no relation with her past because past and present are not related
chronologically but ontologically. According to Sartrean concept of temporality it would be
wrong to say that Mitro has a past because the expression ‘to have a past’ presupposes that the
possessor is nothing more than an object. So this should be replaced by the expression ‘to be’ its
own past. The term ‘was’ does not denote past but serve as an intermediary between the present
and the past. “The term ‘was’ indicates the ontological leap from the present into the past and
represents an original synthesis of these two temporal modes” (Sartre, Being and Nothingness
137). The past is something which a person ‘has to be’ without any possibility of any change in
it. Nothing can be added or removed. In this sense past exists as a thing among the other things
in the world. On the other hand, a being is not his past as he is not it because he was it. In this
way a being-for-itself continually preserves the possibility of changing the meaning of the past in
so far as this is an ex-present which has a future. “Thus the past is the ever growing totality of
the in-itself which we are” (Sartre, Being and Nothingness 138). Mitro is her past in the sense
that she cannot change the facts of her birth or her past relations or her past acts but as a freedom
she has the possibility to change the meaning of her past. It is in her attempt to change the
meaning of the past that she emerges out as an ever-growing being who is beyond the
understanding of her family members. Dhanwanti says about her to Banwari:

   . . . No one can understand this girl! If she is well disposed, she would behave
better than the best of friends. And if she is ill disposed, then there won’t be an
enemy worse than her. If she wants, she would sacrifice everything she has, if not,
she would curse and slander her own husband! (72)

She is a mystery for Suhag too who says to Dhanwanti:

   What we puny people have to judge the deeds and actions of anybody else,
mother? Easy-going sister-in-law, now enraged and now composed. What is in
her heart, she alone knows but she has insatiable thirst in her body! (84)
After Mitro’s going to her mother’s house, Gurudas says to Dhanwanti:

If you ask me the life of this house is the Middle One. She might be shark-sharp with her tongue, but at least she keeps cooing and chirping at every step and turn!

(87)

Mitro is not only body but she is a synthetic totality which cannot be judged on the basis of only one aspect of her being but can be analyzed only in terms of her relationship with the other members of the family. She respects her father-in-law and mother-in-law though she does not explicitly claims it. She feels pain when Phulan insults Suhag and Dhanwanti. When she rebukes her for asking Suhag to return her clothes and for blaming Dhanwanti for grabbing hold of her jewellery, Dhanwanti’s heart is filled with love at the thought that the one, whom she always curses, has supported her. Though she never shows concern for the household chores and the other problems of the family but she does not lag behind when needed. She takes the charge of kitchen when Suhag is not well. She gives all the money she had, without slightest hesitation, to Sardari to make up the loss in business. She loves Sardari, like any wife would do, and wants to be loved by him but he never reciprocates her love. She says to Suhag, “Elder one, there cannot be a man more dullard than your brother-in-law is. He neither feels any pleasure or pain, nor love or affection, nor any passion or desire. What he knows is slapping and thrashing only!” (18). It shows that she not only wants mechanical play of bodies but love. Her sexual desire involves her aspiration for love. She wants to be loved as an equal by her husband and not to be beaten by him as an animal. She desires to possess him and to be possessed by him as a living freedom. This project of love demands acceptance and understanding not domination. Mitro does not want to be treated by Sardari like a thing which can be used anytime the way he wants irrespective of her wishes:

Having done with the dispute when the Middle one came back to her room, on seeing the still spread out bedding of her husband she kept standing there for a long time in dilemma arguing with herself. Massaged her aching bones for some time and then chuckled on seeing her face in the mirror kept on the mantelpiece – This half-wit husband of mine does not know how a deep-like-a-river woman such as me could be mastered. When I get ready for him, he goes out for buying groceries. Gosh, how the man, who has not learned the art of handling a woman, would handle this daughter of Balo, the renowned woman of her region? (32)
Mitro’s complaint that Sardari does not know how to keep a woman happy is supported by the other family members also directly or indirectly. In the beginning when Mitro is presented in the court of her father-in-law then instead of saying anything to Mitro, he rebukes Sardari. “Shame on you, Sardarilal, shame on you! You don’t even know how to tackle a woman and at the top of it, this sinful behaviour” (37). Banwari too asks Sardari, “Listen brother! I am also married not even once but twice. But I never had to face such a situation. Why is it that only your woman creates such a scene?” (14).

Mitro loves Sardari but his passive and indifferent attitude disturbs her. Mitro’s self-questioning is a sign of a lack or nothingness in her being which she desires to fill. It is through man, the being-for-itself, that nothingness in the form of nihilation comes into the world. Sartre explains this concept by citing the example of Pierre who is expected to be there in café. But due to Pierre’s absence the whole café which is a concrete reality slips into the background. This process of sliding all the things which are not Pierre into the background is called nihilation. In the same way when Mitro does not find Sardari with her when she expects him to be there, then all the efforts she made for looking beautiful, her feelings and her desires stand nihilated. This nihilation is the result of her attempt to find coincidence with her own being as “the man is always separated from what he is by all the breadth of the being which he is not” (Sartre, Being and Nothingness 41). Her feeling of nothingness signifies that her conflict with Sardari is not the result of her revolt against patriarchy or the social norms but it is the result of her attempt to find a coincidence with her own self through the contact of the other. She loves him and is concerned with his pains and pleasures. She takes dinner for him and tries to cheer him up with her playful behaviour when he is worried due to loss in business:

To draw attention of Sardarilal sitting on the bed, Mitro banged her foot on the floor, clinked her bangles. In spite of doing all this when overpowered by worries the son of the mother-in-law did not move, Mitro’s affection surged up for him, placing the plate on her palm and her foot on the arm of the bed, she said with a playful movement of her eyes, “Here, my Lord! I’m at your service! If you like gulp this buttered enemy of mine, if not then you can chew me too.” (46)

She feeds him with her own hands but when Sardari does not even look at her, she gets worried but naughtily asks him the reason of his indifference to her. On listening to it Sardari looks at her for a moment which gives her immense satisfaction. She wants to be his companion.
by sharing his happiness and his problems. When she comes to know that money can bring his smile back, then without giving a second thought, she presents before him all the money she has and requests him to accept it. This incident signifies her love and concern for her husband.

Mitro’s devil-may-care attitude gives impression that her only concern is her physical pleasure but her desire to be a mother signifies that she is not only a body but a totality. When Dhanwanti says to her that Sardari would come on the right track when she would be blessed with children, “Mitro went on staring at her mother-in-law. A fire seemed to rage in her eyes and her words became a sharp-edged dagger – Shun that hope, mother! If anything like that happens in the family of your darling son, then Mitro will feel blessed by washing the feet even of a sweeper-woman and drinking the same!” (67). After some days when Dhanwanti blesses her with being mother, she says again, “Had it been in my control, I would have given birth to one hundred kauravas. But mother, why don’t you do something about your darling son so that this stone statue like body of mine may feel some pulsation within? (75). Her desire to be a mother is also outcome of her more fundamental desire to find a justification of her being in the being of her child but she is unable to fulfill this desire because of Sardari’s impotency. The expression “stone-statue body of mine” is paradoxical as she refers to herself as a body, a being-in-itself incapable of consciousness but, on the other hand, her consciousness of lack proves her existence as a being-for-itself. All of her desires whether it is a desire for physical pleasure or desire to be mother or desire to negate Sardari’s authority over her, are the concrete manifestation of her desire to assert herself which is impossible without the intervention of the Other.

Her encounter with Sardari is, in fact, a conflict between the self and the Other. In spite of all his physical strength he is not able to make her lower her look which is a source of anxiety for him. She reduces all his manliness to nothingness only through her look. Mitro’s look is Sartrean “the look”. Sartre uses this term to explain the fundamental relation of objectness between the self and the Other. Sardari’s feeling of being-seen-by-her reduces him from the position of a subject to that of an object. Mitro’s being beaten up by Sardari has become a matter of serious concern for all the family members but, ironically, Mitro herself is unaffected by all this. This physical torture fails to disturb her. After the fight, Banwari takes both Sardari and Mitro along with him with the intention to resolve the matter. The two brothers are fuming with rage and Dhanwanti is very worried about Mitro because she feels that Mitro will not be spared by them but what actually happens was totally unexpected. “The middle one was sitting on the
bed without covering her head and giggling. The older son, Banwari, standing there, having his hands crossed over his chest was grinding his teeth in anger” (16). Both brothers give in when they find Mitro unyielding and go to sleep in the other room and Suhag takes Mitro along with her. When the brothers closed the door of the adjoining room then “the middle one touched her forehead, made a cackle and said, “The dullards! Had they any manhood, they would have either licked me all over with relish or torn me apart like a lion” (18). She is very quick in getting other’s intentions. Phulan’s real disease under the cover of high blood pressure is not hidden from her. Only she knows how to tackle her. Phulan too knows that she can befool everybody but not Mitro. So, she is afraid to face her sometimes. She finds Phulan’s acting very amusing. She exposes Phulan through her banters with her. Firstly, she ridicules her high blood pressure by exaggerating it:

Danger? Gulzarizari Lal, Does anybody survive this fatal high blood pressure!
This disease ends up claiming the victim’s life only! You should get jam of pearls for the queen Phulan and get her treated by Hakim Nadirshah. (24)

When on listening to it Phulan starts crying to gain sympathy of her husband, Mitro shows her real picture to Gulzari by throwing away her façade of sickness:

At first Mitro kept on looking , then winking at her brother-in-law she clapped her hands – hat’s off to you dear Phulan! Gulzari, this woman of yours has neither blood pressure, nor any pain or weakness. It’s all woman’s tactics. Dear brother Gulzari, if you keep on behaving like a fool like this, then one day this thief woman will take away all your senses! (25)

Mitro talks to Janko, her sister-in-law, in a very friendly way. She is always ribbing her about her husband which brightens her face all the more. Her humorous attacks don’t spare even Dhanwanti. When Dhanwanti keeps on hugging her daughter Janko for a long time Mitro says, “Mother, save a bit of your affection for we brides too” (50). Mitro’s rejuvenating jokes fill everybody with a new energy. When Dhanwanti asks Suhag to serve some refreshment to Janko as she must have been very tired, “the middle one winked at her sister-in-law – oh! What tiredness now? Your oppressor (her husband) is miles away now!” Forgetting her age and all her worries, Dhanwanti too joins Mitro in teasing her daughter. Rocking the baby in her arms she says, “Janko, your bhabhi is right. This is the proof of my son-in-law’s oppression” (52-53). It makes everybody rolling with laughter. On the other hand, Suhag maintains some distance in her
relationship with Janko. She behaves as if she has been very senior to her in age and experience. She does not like Mitro’s ribbing Janko and orders her, “Enough of joking and jibing, Janko, go and sit beside the mother” and then rebukes Mitro, “You have perfection is the sixteen art, sister, but I entreat you please don’t teach your wrong ways this naïve bride of another’s house”, Mitro taunts, “What rot, Elder one! This innocent sister-in-law has given birth to a boy even without my teachings! O Elder one, the way through which a girl takes birth, through the same way she learns all the secrets of life” (55).

Mitro is so ebullient that loss in business cannot dampen her high spirits. Banwari and Sardari are under debt in the grain market because of Gulzari. She says to Suhag, “Those who are under any debt, let them be, I am under the spell of a horned jinn right now” (41). Her indifference to family problems irritates Suhag but Mitro feels disturbed on seeing Sardari’s depressed face which signifies her concern for him. She expresses her willingness to help him in resolving the issue but Sardari tells her, “Noble lady, it is not within your capacity. It is not a matter of some hundreds but of thousands” (49). She proves him wrong by giving him the handsome amount of three thousand rupees. Seeing Sardari surprised, Mitro keeps on laughing and then requests him to accept the money. “Sardarilal felt sorry. Though her ways are not good but it does not behove him to raise hand on her” (49).

Phulan’s daily fights with Dhanwanti and Suhag, Janko’s arrival at her parental house with her new born son and loss in the business are some instances of ‘facticity’ which are same for all the family members but what makes the difference is the way in which these situations are interpreted by them. All the members of the family interpret these situations in accordance with the worldly norms except Mitro. She is not afraid of social criticism. She does only that which she ‘feels like doing’, and not that which she ‘should do’. She emerges as an existentially free being who has courage to make her own rules and her own interpretations. Sartre terms this activity of apprehending one’s freedom and then wish to use this freedom as ‘play’. Explaining it further he says, “The first principle of play is man himself; through it he escapes his natural nature; he himself sets the values and rules for his acts and consents to play only according to the rules which he himself has established and defined” (Being and Nothingness 601). Mitro’s acts can be termed as ‘play’ as her reactions are never guided by the social code of conduct. Suhag advises her that she should not joke because the men in the house are worried but her logic fails to convince Mitro and she refuses to feign sadness. She says what she feels without any
hesitation. Phulan who is not afraid of anybody in the house, is afraid of Mitro only because of her straightforwardness. She is bold enough to address her as \textit{phrebwanti} instead of Phulanwanti (42) and to express her liking for Banwari unhesitantly in front of his wife Suhag. Her non-conformist behaviour is the result of her rejection of pre-existing norms about propriety and the decision to create her own definitions.

Mitro’s goal is neither to surprise, expose or shock anybody nor to attain the central position in the house but to attain herself as a certain being. Thus, in play the desire to \textit{do} is reducible to a desire to \textit{be} because “the act is not its own goal for itself; neither does its explicit end represent its goal and its profound meaning; but the function of the act is to make manifest and to present to itself the absolute freedom which is the very being of the person . . .

Nevertheless the fact remains that the desire to play is fundamentally desire to be” (Sartre, \textit{Being and Nothingness} 602). Her unhesitant acceptance of her physical needs is just one of her other similar acts like countering Sardari with her ‘gaze’, rebuking Phulan for her pretence of illness, sitting in front of her brother-in-law and father-in-law without covering her head and answering their questions fearlessly. All of her actions are the concrete manifestation of her desire to be. This desire is the result of \textit{a priori} description of the being-for-itself which lacks a certain coincidence with itself but problem arises when this desire to attain a certain coincidence with one’s own being clashes with social norms and values. Mitro’s desire to exist as an individual who has her own perception about life clashes with the social role of a wife she is occupying in the society. As a conscious being she is not ready to suppress her physical desires but society does not allow a married woman to express such desires as the basis of marriage in Hindu society is procreation and not physical pleasure. Mitro is criticized as a woman of easy virtue by her family members because she charges her husband with inability to satisfy her physical needs and asserts her sexuality which is unacceptable in the traditional family set-up. Sardari, in turn, charges her with having sexual relations with other men. After their quarrel at night, Mitro is presented in the court of Gurudas next morning where Mitro is asked to justify her bahaviour:

This time Banwari asked the middle one in a more challenging tone, “Sumitrawanti, what Sardari is claiming as truth, you say yourself that it is wrong.”

Mitro, with a bangle-banging movement of her arm, pulled the veil from her forehead, and looked straight at her brother-in-law, then turned to her elder sister-
in-law and said with pride and dancing eyes, “Noble persons, it’s both true and false!”

Gurudas was struck as if with paralysis. Banwari bowed his head in utter shame. Sardari put his tightened fist over his breast.

Shaking her head violently, Dhanwanti cursed her daughter-in-law, “Bravo! Bravo! Sumitrawanti! Throw more dust in the eyes of the world! You trickster, your truth and falsehood is one and your amorous eyes are two! Why don’t you declare that your mother, the birth-giver, has fed you truth with one breast and falsehood with the other?”

Suhagwanti flabbergasted, “Mitro shall have to take another birth to have restraint!” (35-36)

Instead of out-rightly rejecting the charge of transgression, she gives an ambiguous answer which is neither complete ‘yes’ nor complete ‘no’. Firstly her transgression and then her unruffled and tactful reply, is shocking for every family member. Their reactions show that no one from Gurudas to Suhag is able to accept her behaviour. But Mitro is imperturbable even when Banwari asks her to explain her statement:

Sardari’s wife got the much desired opportunity. With dancing eyeballs like the two round cups, she said, “Should I let this golden body of mine be consumed by all these worries or should I exhaust myself in the useless matters of Gulzari’s newly wedded wife? What I have said is true my respectful brother-in-law because forgetting the miseries of this world I spent a little time of my life happily in playing with the people of this world. And this allegation is a lie because I have not become a prostitute leaving the kingdom of my husband. (36)

Her reply that the charge of extra-marital relations levelled against her, is both true and false at the same time signifies her recognition of existential lack as “the nature of consciousness simultaneously is to be what it is not and not to be what it is” (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 94). She simultaneously ‘is’ and ‘is not’ a transgressor because her being is a continuous flight towards ‘becoming’ something else. Human being suffers a lack of identity with himself till death. So, man’s existence becomes a constant strive for a coincidence with his own self. There are two ways of attaining this self-identification: the first way is to turn oneself into a thing by fitting into the already existing framework of life and by following the rules made by others
which Sartre defines as to be overpowered by the ‘spirit of seriousness’. This is an unauthentic way because it involves an escape from freedom. The second way is to look face to face one’s freedom and create his/her own values by making authentic choices. Mitro adopts the second way when she decides that she will not be a party to conformity which recommends that things should always be left as they are, and she can choose at the price of her responsibility, the shape which the world will assume for her. Opposite to it, sincerity, which is identified with that honesty by which a person admits to be as ‘he is’, is the outcome of the conformist attitude. To accept oneself as a particular being is to negate one’s freedom, to negate its possibility to ‘become’. Thus this desire to escape the constant obligation of becoming and to rest in a state of stability is the result of bad faith and the same desire is implied by sincerity. So sincerity is also a form of bad faith which hides from the individual what he is at a particular time and what he can be in future. But Mitro chooses to be non-sincere by simultaneous accepting and rejecting the charge of having extra-marital relations. She does not hide anything from herself. She accepts her physical needs and at the same time acknowledges the importance of being married. She neither claims to be a self-sacrificing wife nor accepts the label of a prostitute. By saying so she keeps her possibility of ‘becoming’ open which is a proof of her desire to be.

It is not Mitro who is deceiving her family members rather they are deceiving themselves because they claim themselves to be very sincere and demand the same sincerity from her. Sartre explains this concept by citing the example of a homosexual who recognizes his homosexual inclinations but refuses with all his strength to consider himself “a paederast”. His friend who acts as his most severe critic is irritated with his duplicity. He asks him only one thing that as the guilty person recognizes himself as guilty, he should declare frankly – “I am a paedrast”. It is pertinent to ask here: Who is in bad faith? The homosexual or the champion of sincerity? By labeling him as a paedrast, the champion of sincerity attempts to close all his future possibilities and to imprison him in one image. So “the champion of sincerity is in bad faith to the degree that he wants to reassure himself, while pretending to judge, to the extent that he demands that freedom as freedom constitute itself as a thing” (Being and Nothingness 87-88). In the same way Mitro’s family members demand her to refute Sardari’s charges in order to forgive her. What they are actually demanding from her is to treat herself as stable and fixed as a stone. Thus, as advocates of sincerity they want temporary custody of her freedom in order to give it back to her with their blessings. According to Sartre, “bad faith utilizes the double property of the human
being, who is at once a facticity and transcendence” (79). By facticity, he means that certain things can be said to pertain to us in factual way which include our body, its height, colour, weight and our entire past – when and where we are born, as well as what we have actually done. But our consciousness is never identified with our facticities because we are more than our body, our past, or our environment. The mere fact that we can contemplate our facticities and examine them as objects proves that we are not identified with them. We are transcendence in the sense that we can think beyond these facts of existence. “These two aspects of human reality are and ought to be capable of a valid coordination. But the bad faith does not wish either to coordinate them or to surmount them in synthesis. It must affirm facticity as being transcendence and transcendence as being facticity” (Sartre, Being and Nothingness 79). Mitro neither transforms her transcendence into facticity by saying that she is having, in fact, only a friendly or a highly spiritual kind of relationship with other persons which is real but a dismal possibility for her nor she turns her facticity into a transcendence by separating her body from her mind and by saying that it is only her body which is involved but she is more than a body. Contrary to it, she acts like a synthesis of facts and possibilities by accepting the fact of her being married but declaring at the same time that besides being a wife, she is an individual also having her own desires.

Stepping out of the social boundaries, she emerges as an altogether different being at her mother’s house. Now she is in a world where bodily desires are not suppressed but celebrated. Her mother, who is a well-known courtesan of the area, makes arrangement for her sexual pleasure. She herself sends her to the visitor’s room then suddenly calls her back and requests her to stay with her permanently along with Sardari because now she has no friends and she alone feels frightened in that big house. Until this moment Mitro was enjoying the sexual freedom available at her mother’s house but when she finds an opportunity to live again in that free world, she feels frightened and slams the door on her mother’s face:

Suddenly, God knows what happened, and Mitro felt terribly frightened. When she looked at the bare, deserted door-flaps against those dark surroundings, a light flashed into her eyes. That gaping house, deserted like a cremation ground, looked like a den of ghosts and that writhing, wailing mother like a thirsty witch! . . . Seeing her mother advance towards her with a deep hissing sound, Mitro was completely thrown out of her wits and was frightened into speechlessness. Then with an effort she steadied herself and shouted with a flash, “You, terrible witch
and a sorceress! Now you want to fry me and my husband like fish in your empty pan! No, it won’t happen that way, Bibi! I warn you!

Then like an arrow she dashed across the verandah to reach the door of the room where Sardarilal was sleeping and in spite of her mother’s trying to force her entry, she slammed the door on her face and bolted it from inside. (97-98)

Mitro’s going back to her husband is defined as the result of her helplessness and her submission to the power of social norms. It is regarded as the defeat of feminism and the victory of traditionalism. But to label Mitro’s decision as her defeat is to deprecate all the existential anxiety she has passed through. The conflict which is always termed as her revolt against social values is, in fact, her existential conflict which is the result of her upsurge as a freedom. A free being encounters choices everywhere and he is free to choose anything but he is not free not to choose because not to choose is a choice itself. Now Mitro is faced with two choices: to stay with her mother or to live with her husband in the house of her in-laws. Mitro chooses to live with her husband. It is pertinent to ask here, how can she call her own mother a witch and a sorceress? Why does her mother appear so horrible to her that she get frightened? As being her only daughter, is it not her duty to support her in her old age? Its answer lies in the issue of responsibility towards each other. Balo pretends to be happy on seeing Mitro with her husband but in her hearts of hearts she is jealous of her happiness. “Seeing her own daughter sitting beside the son-in-law, a snake like tremor ran all over her body. Not one but hundreds of men had danced to Balo’s tune. But this unfortunate one did not have the luck of getting a husband for herself. . . On seeing Sardari going out, the pain which Balo felt in her heart for what she had missed, Mitro pulled together in her eyes” (90-91). When Mitro asks her why she needs to compete with her daughter when she (Balo) has new pleasure every day, Balo cannot tolerate Mitro’s taking pride in being married. In order to drag her back to her old ways she allures her with the dream of physical pleasure. When Mitro tells her merrily that her husband is not a lamb but a lion, Balo feels hurt, “What pride! Feeling the pinch of her daughter’s remark, she said to herself, “You too have fun for a few nights, girl. Then who the pimp of a man would remain your husband and whose wife thou would be!” (94) and feigning affection she sends her to the client’s room but does not let her enter his room. She suddenly calls her back not because she cares for her married life but she takes it an attack on her ego to let her enjoy with the man who once used to come to her wagging his tail. She considers it her insult that she is being ignored because of
her old age. She asks Mitro to stay with her not out of love but out of her feeling of selfishness. Thus, the relationship between Balo and Mitro is not of a mother and daughter but of two freedoms, each trying to out-transcend the other and emerge as a subject. But Mitro does not let herself become an object by throwing the other, Balo, out of her life.

This decision of Mitro which is always termed as ‘going back to her husband’ should be replaced by ‘leaving her mother’ because the term ‘going back’ implies a separation between them. Though she is not sexually satisfied with Sardari but she never thinks in terms of separation from him. She loves him and his family. She wants to be the mother of his child. She makes efforts to keep him happy but her encounter with her mother makes her understand her own feelings in a better way. As sartre says, “In order to get any truth about myself, I must have contact with another person. The other is indispensable to my own existence as well as to my knowledge about myself” (Existentialism and Human Emotions 38). Her mother helps her in resolving her conflict and accepting Sardari in totality. Her desire for sexual satisfaction is the result of conflict between her facticity and her transcendence. This desire for physical satisfaction is not an end in itself but, in fact, it is the desire to find the foundation of her being by possessing the other person as a freedom. This fundamental desire to exist finds expression through different concrete desire. Desire to love and desire to be loved are the two empirical expressions of the abstract desire to be. So no doubt Mitro is changed and this change is not regressive but progressive which helps her in resolving her conflict by making authentic choice. At the end she leaves her mother and chooses to live with her husband which implies her acceptance of the social code of conduct. She does at the end what Suhag is doing from the beginning. But what distinguishes her from Suhag is the degree of personal responsibility they put into their acts. Suhag’s actions are the result of her sense of obligation whereas Mitro’s relationship with Sardari is the result of her conscious choice. Mitro’s greatness lies in her courage to accept the consequences of her action from the beginning to the end. Thus Mitro earns the loving title of Marjani in her own right by deciding to live the values she has chosen instead of following the norms imposed by others.

2. **Surajmukhi Andhere Ke**

   Ratti, the protagonist in *Surajmukhi Andhere Ke*, comes next to Mitro in the category of controversial characters created by Krishna Sobti. Ratti and Mitro are like the two extremes of the same pole. As much Mitro is sexually vivacious and feisty, Ratti is sexually frigid that much.
The reason behind Ratti’s sexual clamming up is her traumatic childhood experience. Ratti is a woman scarred by childhood rape. The deep-rooted fear of this incident in her mind leaves her unable to easily accept any relationship in her life. The totality of her being is shattered as she feels her body alienated from her being. At temporal plane, she moves ahead but at existential plane, she is still trapped in that horrible moment of her childhood. Contrary to the critical comments, the protagonist in the narrative is not a sexually scandalous woman but an existentially tormented individual and the theme is not a craving for free sex but a desire to achieve the wholeness of being by acting as a freedom. As the word *andhere* in title suggests that it is undoubtedly a depiction of the exploitation, struggles, and defeat in life but the term *surajmukhi* signifies a ray of hope, an optimism, and power to blossom in spite of the darkness. Thus the title symbolizes the eternal desire of human beings to fight and survive in even in the most adverse conditions of life.

The narrative is divided into three parts: the bridge, tunnels and sky. The first part which has been titled “the bridge” describes her stay with Keshi and his family. They are very dear to her and help her to bridge the abyss of darkness in her life. The second part “tunnels” is about the dark phases she went through in her childhood and in her present life. It signifies her desire to free herself from the stigma of rape. The third part “sky” symbolizes the freedom she attains at the end of her long struggle with herself. She comes into the light of love out of the years-long darkness of traumatic incident of her childhood. These three themes would be explained further while analyzing the text in detail.

The narrative begins with Ratti at Hawa Ghar. This is the place where the most horrible incident of her life took place many years ago. Even after so many years Ratti has not been able to come out of the trauma of that incident. Even today her pain is as intense as it was at that terrible moment. She is undergoing the same torture. She is haunted by her past:

> Crushing the snow underfoot, Ratti was moving ahead oblivious to the people walking on the road. A strange frenzy in her walk. A furious pace. . . . Her snow boots stamped the deep block print marks upon the whiteness. . . . At the bend, she paused and glanced at her watch – six o’clock. There was a flash of desperation in her eyes, but she kept walking.
A decades-old day. A decades-old evening. The same frosty winter. (Krishna Sobti, *Surajmukhi Andhere Ke*)

The relation of an individual’s present with his past is not external but an internal one. Though past is something which is ‘not’ the present but it constantly haunts the present. Sartre states, “one cannot ‘have’ a past as one ‘has’ an automobile or a racing stable. That is, the past cannot be possessed by a present being which remains strictly external to it as I remain, for example, external to my fountain pen. External relations would hide an impassable abyss between a past and a present which would then be two factual givens without real communication” (136).

Striding across the distance, Ratti reached Hawa Ghar. The overarching curve of the dome, and the railing next to it. Then a short flight of steps. Those very steps. She stepped up and clutched at the railing. Leaping. Swooping. The same hand. No! This is not that place . . . It cannot be. No! A sudden fear severely contracted her whole body and her breasts stiffened as if someone had dug in claws. (8)

On being at the same place after the gap of a very long time period, Ratti feels the same incident happening with her again. She feels the same pain and fear. In spite of all her efforts, she is unable to detach herself from that horrible moment and, thus, living the truth of her past constantly even in her present. She has no option other than to live her past because:

The past which I am, I have to be with no possibility of not being it. . . . from the content of the past as such I can remove nothing, and I can add nothing to it. In other words the past which I was is what it is; it is an in-itself like the things in the world. The relation of being which I have to sustain with the past is a relation of the type of the in-itself – that is, an identification with self. (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 139)

Her rape has fixed her being as a thing without any possibility to be anything else. It has left her incomplete and helpless. Her mind is tormented with the question that why she has not been given chance to become a complete woman. She feels that whenever she wants to move ahead she is dragged behind by the perturbing memory of that incident which has created an unbridgeable abyss between what she is as her own past and what she wants to be as future. She

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6 The subsequent references from the text have been cited with page numbers written in parenthesis.
feels that her possibility to fill this gap has been snatched out of her hand. Comparing herself to gin, she feels, “This time the gin was not as pungent. Wasn’t even bland. It just was. She too just is. Her pungency, bitterness all have come to an end. She is dull. A dull woman. A girl who was never a girl. A woman who was never a woman” (9). Ratti says that she just ‘is’ but existentially a being never ‘is’ rather ‘becoming’ who is continuously striving to find the foundation of his being. An individual who defines himself as ‘is’, in fact, tries to escape his freedom but contrary to it Ratti’s recognition of her ‘is-ness’ is the evidence of her acceptance of her freedom. It is only her unsuccessful attempts to get what she desires which makes her feel static like a thing. “Each time, the undying desire to reach somewhere. And each time a desolate return to herself” (9). Ratti’s desire is desire to become God which is both undying and unattainable. Sartre repeatedly avers in his *Being and Nothingness* that man’s basic self-contradictory aim is to be his own foundation, to reach the satisfying fullness and the self-identity of the object while yet remaining sufficiently distinguished from this self. In other words, this ultimate and unachievable longing is to become God. This is at the root of Ratti’s self-questioning and her feeling of superfluity of her life. Her anxiety is the result of her recognition of existential freedom which has been enslaved earlier and even now is under the constant threat of enslavement. But even as a child, she does not submit to the ignominy that is heaped on her as the aftermath of the rape.

‘Tunnels’ is the second and the longest section of the narrative. It symbolizes the dark phase of her life from her rape till her meeting with Diwakar. The social disgrace which was imposed on her after her rape caused her to grow up as a sexually frigid young girl but these extremely dismal conditions could not dampen her assertive spirits. Even as a child instead of withdrawing into a corner or cursing her bad luck, she hits back both physically and verbally with her full might. Ajju, Shyamli and Pashi are the concrete representations of the disgraceful and unsympathetic attitude of the society towards the rape-victim. Ratti’s hitting them back with double force reflects her determination to fight back the injustice done to her. The attitude of the other children towards her illustrates how a rape-victim is doubly victimized in society. She wants to be her own master and does not want to let herself be defined by the parochial social outlook. It is the conflict of self and the Other and Ratti as self wants to preserve her selfhood through the counter-attack. She batters Ajju’s head, when he says, “. . . you are not a good girl. . . . Someone did the bad thing with you. . . . You bled. Didn’t you?” (47). All her schoolmates-
Dimpy, Ajju, Pikku and Shyamali- gang up against her but Ratti remains firm and undaunted, “Ratti blinked back her tears and fiercely told herself – Quite! Catch each one of them and thrash them” (53). She is segregated at the time when she needs the company of her friends. Her search for friends is of no use. Instead of friends, she finds herself surrounded by enemies who are teasing and taunting her always. She tries to compromise with them but when they do not understand her, Ratti becomes fierce and thrashes one of them to teach a lesson to all the teasers:

Book in hand, Ratti sat away from the crowd of girls. . . . Once or twice she looked up, searching for a friendly face, but met the same cold wall of hostility each time, and lowered her eyes back to the book. Then from a pit of loud, shrill laughter, she heard a mention of her name.

“Oh let her be! Let Ratti sit alone.”

“Why doesn’t she like us?”

“No. She prefers boys to girls.”

“How can girls give her what she wants?” – another taunt hurled at her like a stone.

. . . And then it was as if a frozen duct had thawed in Ratti’s bosom, rolled down her arm and congealed into iron. She grabbed Pashi by his throat, pinned him down and kicked him again and again, as if he were a stone. As if he were hate itself . . .

“I don’t say anything to anyone. But remember if you ever taunt me again, I won’t spare you. Understand? . . . Ratti was grateful to her own capability to defend herself. (53-56)

At a delicate age when she does not properly understand the meaning of being raped, she becomes aware of the fundamental truth of existence i.e. nobody else but only she can save herself. After passing through much agony and pain, she reaches at the conclusion, that, if she does not want to be an object of their fun, she will have to fight back to gain her freedom. At emotional level, she is alone not only in her school but at her home also. Instead of loving her, her parents beat her ruthlessly for beating Ajju. Ratti feels that her parents are not different from Dimpi and Ajju. She hits back the outsider physically and verbally but she counter-attacks her parents through her violent ‘gaze’: 
Still Ratti kept gazing at them stubbornly. Such torment in her eyes as if Mama were Dimpy and Papa, Ajju.

“Just look at her . . . despite all the thrashing she is . . .” Mama panted with hatred.

“Why did you hit Ajju while going to Miss David’s house?” Papa asked.

The same defying silence.

“Why you didn’t give him the flowers if he asked for them?”

When she continued to stare in silence, Mama shook her again furiously. . . .

“Come here child”

. . . Ratti looked at them with eyes older, sterner than theirs and shook her head,

“No!” (48–49).

Her ‘no’ is, in fact, her refusal to be dominated by all those persons who try to limit and fix her possibilities. It is only through the Other that a self gains its objectness because a person cannot be an object for himself. Ratti’s unyielding ‘look’ symbolizes her refusal to accept them as subjects having power to define her. Her schoolmates and her parents call her a bad girl but Ratti is unable to find anything bad in herself as:

To apprehend myself as evil, for example, could not be to refer myself to what I am for myself, for I am not and cannot be evil for myself for two reasons. In the first place, I am neither evil, for myself, nor a civil servant or a physician. In fact, I am in the mode of not being what I am and of being what I am not. The qualification “evil”, on the contrary, characterizes me as an in-itself. In the second place, if I were to be evil for myself, I should of necessity be so in the mode of having to be so and I would have to apprehend myself as evil . . . I would have to hate myself as precisely as I am myself. (Sartre, Being and Nothingness 297)

This label of ‘bad girl’ snatches away from a little girl, Ratti, her childhood, the golden period of her life. It is her desire to define herself for herself by tearing away the labels imposed upon her which makes her status higher than her parents. Among the persons who are trying to enslave her by out-transcending her freedom, there is only one person who tries to complement her by assimilating her freedom within that of his own and this person is Asad Bhai. It is only Asad Bhai who understands Ratti and encourages her towards normalcy. His love works as a curative medicine for her emotional wounds. His words, “Ratti will always remember that she is a good girl. Sweet and Brave” (59) are invaluable for her. Ratti feels an indescribable calmness
in his company but she is not able to clearly understand her own feelings as “. . . there was something in his eyes that Ratti could not understand” (59). Ratti-Asad relationship continues for many years. Asad’s concern for the smallest change in her life, makes Ratti feel important and desirable. He says to her, “Every time I come home on vacation, something or the other has changed. Sometimes you start tying up your hair. Sometimes you start wearing a kurta instead of a frock. . . . and sometimes when I come then I see odhni draped round your neck. . . . The warmth in Ratti’s eyes touched Ratti’s face” (61). Asad loves Ratti as freedom and wants to marry her. Ratti too loves him and the feeling that she is the only source of his values provides foundation to her contingent existence. But with Asad’s death she is once again left alone in an alien world. Losing the foundation of her being, she is again lost in the abyss of darkness. The only voice which made her feel good is lost and she is again surrounded by the voices disgracing her. This disgrace dogs her steps for years. Her whole being is once again reduced to battered body, just a sexual object. Ratti’s struggle to raise herself from a sexual object to a totality, manifested as a body, starts again. Her desire is not to love a body only but a body in situation i.e. an organic whole having a consciousness and vice versa with the aim to be incarnated by incarnating the Other.

Sartre characterizes this behaviour as ‘going beyond a situation’. “Man is characterized above all by his going beyond a situation” (Search For A Method 91). This going beyond is at the very root of human existence. In order to be what he is not, a man will have to go beyond a given situation, “the given, which we surpass at every instant by the simple fact of living it, is not restricted to material conditions of our existence; we must include in it . . . our own childhood” (Sartre, Search For A Method 100). Here the ‘given’, which Ratti is required to go beyond, is the trauma of her rape in childhood. Ratti’s contact with Rohit, Omi, Bali, Ranjan, Sumer, Bhanurao, Subramaniam, Jaynath, Mahen and Shripat – a very long list, is the result of her this very attempt. But none of these can reach the core of Ratti’s heart as all of these relations are distorted. While talking to Bhanurao, she sums up all her attempts to go beyond the situation through the analogy of telephone numbers, “Whenever I’ve dialed a number, it has never rung in the right place. If it did, the phone was engaged or there was no one at the other end. And if there was somebody at the other end, there was no voice that could reach me” (90). She means to say that whenever she tried to enter into a relationship, she never found the right person. If she ever found the right person, then he was already into some relationship. Sometimes she felt that
somebody was there when actually there was nobody. And if she found somebody, he could not touch her heart. The reason behind the failure of all the relationships is her desire to assert herself. She does not want to be treated as a sexual object. Her relation with one man after the other is the result of her desire to be respected as a being and not used as flesh only. Years ago, she has undergone the hellish torture of being reduced to flesh only. Even after the passage of so many years, she is not able to forget that pain. She is hurt but her desire to love and to be loved is not dead. Her relationship with different persons is prompted by her this very desire but as soon as she becomes aware of their selfish interests or their craving for her body, she snaps ties with them. Ratti’s unsuccessful relationships are the concrete representation of the extent of damage done to her being by the sexual molestation in childhood.

Among all these relationships which find mention in the section ‘tunnels’, the first name is Jagatdhar. Ratti takes him to be his good friend. She has no objection to his relationship with Mita but Jagatdhar, who is already in a relationship, wants to carry on with Ratti also in the guise of a friend. He says to Ratti, ‘‘Mita’s there. But its you I want . . . you, Ratti.’ Ratti pulled herself free. ‘Jagatdhar, we are good friends. But Mita and you love each other’’ (69-70). When Jagatdhar finds that she is going out of his possession, he taunts her that she is leaving him for Rohit but Ratti replies calmly, “No. Rohit and Ranjan are also my friends, just like you, Jagatdhar. . . . now don’t worry. I’ll seek your Mitu’s pardon for this evening” (70).

Just like Jagatdhar, Rohit too craves for her body. In the guise of a friend, he wants to exercise his right on her more than a friend. He feels that he has the right to tell Ratti what she should do and what not because it is he who has to face humiliation because of Ratti’s friendship with Ranjan. One evening when he raises objection on Ratti’s friendship with Ranjan, Ratti asks him to stay away from her personal matters but he insists, “No, I won’t. You must know what the boys and the girls know about both of you” (71) and he keeps on insisting that she should accept that her going out with Ranjan and Omi and coming late at night was wrong. At last Ratti has to say, “Look, I heard you out patiently because I didn’t want to ruin your evening. But you are not my guardian, Rohit. We do not dislike one another, and that is the extent of our claim on each other. . . . you dare not talk like this to me again, today or on any other day! Where I go and with whom I go is my business and mine alone!” (72). To hide his own feeling of shame, Rohit calls Ratti’s attitude “the trump card of anger” (72). Ratti does not want to earn the long-lost label of a good girl at the cost of her freedom. She does not want to toe the footsteps of others and wants to
make her own choice on her own responsibility. Next time he visits her to ask her for marriage before submitting to his father’s command to get married:

Rohit came close and touched her arm, “Say yes Ratti, just once. I love you Ratti, I want you.” Ratti looked at him blankly. She searched for a single moment when his touch has warmed her, but found nothing. An acerbic smile grew on her lips. She laughed bitterly and said, ‘One does not get someone simply because someone wants them.’ (73)

It was an attack on Rohit’s ego and he could not tolerate it. He tries his best to convince her of his love for her but when Ratti says, “there must be mutual desire for two people to be together, Rohit” (74). Listening to it, he starts fuming with anger and suddenly flung his desire for Ratti to the ground, “Who the hell will want you, you cold wretched luckless girl. . . . Would you care to hear what Ranjan and Omi say about you? That you have no heat barring that of the clothes on your body” (74). It is not conflict between Ratti and Rohit but between two desires. What Rohit actually desires is not Ratti but the satisfaction of his own ego. He wants to overpower the girl who had insulted him by refusing to listen to him. He wants to take revenge of his defeat at her hands by making her submit to him by hook or by crook but Ratti refuses to accept his domination. At last when he finds himself defeated again, he throws away his façade of love and exposes his real self. The only way he is left with, to save his own self-respect is to reduce the other to the level of a thing, a lifeless stone. He never misses the opportunity to offend her. He is not able to face Ratti but in order to hide this unpleasant truth from himself, he tries to portray her as a play-girl. “Rohit looked at her, as if at a cold impassive rock, then asked adamantly, “When are you throwing Ranjan out of your life? Will he be out in this term or not? (italics mine)” The shine was back in Ratti’s eyes. “That’s history you are talking of, Rohit, a moth-eaten past” (76). In this repeated clash of freedoms, Ratti turns out to be unscathed.

The terms ‘cold’, ‘frigid’, ‘impassive’ and ‘rock’ have been time and again used for Ratti. Thus, this coldness and frigidity become the defining features of her character. Character is not something pre-given rather it is developed through actions because “what was once both a vague comprehension of our class, of our social conditioning by the way of the family group, and a blind going beyond, an awkward effort to wrench ourselves away from all this, at last ends up inscribed in us in the form of character” (Sartre, Search For A Method 100-101). Thus character is the outcome of a given situation and an individual’s effort to go beyond that situation. It is the
summation of all the traces of revolt against the given and against the impositions by the Other. So the features like Ratti’s serial relationships, her desire to open up with somebody but her sudden clamming up, her courage to enter into and come out of a relation define her character. Her relationships are full of complexities and deviations. When it appears that her life is on track, it suddenly turns upside down. About it Sartre opines, “At this level also are traces left by our first revolts, our desperate attempts to go beyond a stifling reality, and the resulting deviations and distortions” (Search For A Method 101).

The next man who calls her ‘cold’ is Bali, who is Omi and Ranjan’s friend. Omi throws a party on Ranjan’s birthday and asks Ratti to join them. He invites Bali, one more friend, with Ratti’s permission. When Bali doesn’t find any feminine shame or any desire in her eyes he teases Ratti:

‘Hey, how can you just thrust your eyes into someone’s face like that! At least learn to be coy and shy like other girls.’ He turned to Ranjan saying, ‘What should one do with this girl, buddy?’ and winking at Ranjan and Omi, added, ‘She’s neither adult nor a minor.’ Ratti laughed amiably at Bali. (78)

In fact, Omi, Ranjan and Bali are homosexuals. Bali catches hold of the fire of desire in Omi’s eyes for Ranjan and with the intention of giving space to them he asks Ratti for a ride up to the bridge. He tells her about Ranjan and Omi’s relationship and unhesitatingly tells that he too is one of them. Even on seeing Ranjan and Omi knotted together on the sand, Ratti remains calm and does not responds to Bali’s subtle advances. It surprises him and he laughingly says to her, “Tell me girl, why are you so cold? Have you fallen into somebody’s trap or not? . . . Ratti said innocently, “Your highness, kindly spare this dunce of a girl now” (italics mine) (80).

Though, like Jagatdhar and Rohit, for Bali too she is nothing more than a body but he is different from both of them because he neither pretends to love her nor imposes anything upon her. He, who himself is brimming up with sexual energy, is surprised to find someone sexually so frigid.

Ratti’s journey is from herself to herself. She knows her destination but the path to reach there is still to be discovered by her. It is possible with a flexible approach and open mind. It is full of twists and turns. None but only she is to decide her direction. The next turn in her way is Sumer who is married. She pines for the bliss of family life with which Sumer is blessed. This is the reason she feels attached to his wife and son. Out of love for the child, she gives a gift on his birthday but it is returned by his wife who doubts Ratti’s intentions for Sumer. Instead of proving
his wife’s doubt baseless, he lets her return Ratti’s gift. Thus in order to prove his loyalty for his wife, he betrays Ratti’s faith on their friendship. She says, “The two of you crushed my simple sentiments underfoot, Sumer!” (84). Ratti’s trust that she is being respected as an individual, is shattered once again.

Human existence is absurd and Ratti’s meeting with David-White is one instance of this absurdity. There is a long list of persons who remain strangers to her even after being together for a long time. Sometimes in spite of all her efforts she does not feel any excitement or warmth in the embrace of her partner. But David-White’s only one glance makes her restless. This self-absorbed person seems like a complete event in himself. She feels that he is none other but her own reflection. She says to herself, “Who is this? Who can this be? It must be Ratti” (85). Ratti finds him out in the crowd and sits in front of him, covering her face with newspaper. She feels, “Now Ratti is all by herself and in front of her is her counter-part” (85). Both of them look at each other as if they are old acquaintances. Ratti is mesmerized by calm and confident personality. He appears to be cutting himself off from the world by holding a newspaper in front of his face. It does not mean that he is afraid of the world but that this outer world is insignificant for a man who has discovered a world inside himself. His gait reflecting his self-confidence attracts Ratti, “If ever got a chance to live again, Ratti would borrow this gait from David-White. Striding across the world as if it were a lounge” (86). It fills her with desire, with warmth, the long-lost warmth. This meeting was like a spark in Ratti’s dark life. He appears to be her destination to Ratti but for him Ratti is only a short stoppage in his journey of life where he spends some time and then moves ahead. Ratti’s destination is lost and her life again becomes a search.

Bhanurao whom she suddenly comes across in a restaurant, belongs to the category of Rohit and Jagatdhar. He too had wanted to get her body only. Remembering her past relation with him, Ratti says, “The faces in your arms, Bhanu, they are all faceless, nameless” (90). When Ratti was with him, he didn’t recognize her worth and now when he is alone, he wants her back in his life and requests her to consider him again but it’s Ratti’s turn now and she does not want to give such a man another chance. She strongly stops all his advances, “What will you do about this delusion, Bhanu! You have been engaged with yourself all the time” (91).

Ratti passionately desires company of somebody who could be the foundation of her foundationless freedom. For it she even undergoes the traditional process of formally meeting a
man through the reference of Veenu, their common friend. Ratti advances towards him with the hope to find her complement but she finds there a broken man in the long struggle of life having “frustration and gravity of long years of solitude visible on his sharp face” (91). How can a man who himself is lost, help Ratti in finding her lost being.

At last on meeting Jainath, she feels that she has found the man of her choice. She is happy that she is going to enter a new phase of her life. “Ratti entered the room with tray in her hands. Looking at Jainath she asked gaily, ‘Where are you? What are you thinking?’ . . . . Jainath started looking at the door – ‘I saw you bringing bed tea in the Calcutta house. That’s all’” (96). His words appear very soothing to Ratti. But Jainath’s seeing Ratti as the mother of his sons hurts her. But she consoles herself – “Jainath is time past. So what? A house. A room. Ratti too needs the warmth of a room” (96). Once again she is confronted with the feeling of objectness which she wants to surpass. “To surpass all that is also to preserve it. We shall think with these original deviations, we shall act with these gestures which we have learned and which we want to reject” (Sartre, *Search For A Method* 101). Ratti too wants to overcome her fear of being treated as a thing, just as a body by the Other. She wants Jainath’s support in making her believe that Jainath wants her for her sake and will help her in filling the nothingness. So, “she turned towards him and murmered, ‘Say something such . . . . do something such that I could do what I must, ‘ but when he says, ‘. . . . I need you Ratti and my business needs your sons,’” (96) Ratti’s freedom is once again attacked. Instead of her destination, Jainath too becomes just one more stoppage in her journey towards self. Jainath does not respect her as an individual but as the mother of his sons. He turns out to be the spokesman of Manu, the first man who claimed in his popular laws, “The spouse is an object of honour in the house; it is she who brings up children” and here the word ‘children’ implies sons only as later describing the pleasure of becoming the father of a male child, Manu says, “When a son even if all covered with dust, runs towards his father and embraces him, what greater pleasure can there exist?” (qtd. in Badar 59-60). According to the Hindu view, a man finds second birth in the form of his son so the mother of the sons should be respected as she is at the roots of perpetuating his race. But Ratti refuses to be an ideal Hindu wife, “You’ll have to find another mother for your sons, Jainath. This woman does not possess the art of making sons” (97) and moves ahead in search of her final destination.

The next two persons she comes across in the journey of life are Mahen and Rajan. Ratti desires to appropriate their bodies so that this appropriation could reveal to her, her own body
but this appropriation is possible only if the Other regard her as a being not a body only. But it neither happens with Mahen nor with Rajan:

“Ratika, didn’t you want it?” Mahen’s irate voice and Ratti’s frightened empty eyes fluttering as if entangled into each other.

Empty as spent desire, Ratti lifted her thorny back off the bed and leaning over Mahen said with chocked throat, “I wanted Mahen but couldn’t . . .”

Mahan flung off the covering sheet acidly as if it were Ratti and broke away.

Rajan too does the same to her:

The passion in Rajan’s eyes seemed to rouse Ratti too deep down. . . . she didn’t stop him. He kissed her. Again and again. Then, as firm proprietary hands seemed to put her to some test. Began to explore Ratti and Ratti, torn in two pieces, tried her utmost and feeling unable to stand it anymore, she wrenched herself free.

Rajan’s mind started burning.

Hiding his anger, Rajan tries his best to maintain the mask of a true lover but Ratti refuses to be deceived anymore. When she feels that she is not being loved but used as a body only, the image of being raped becomes alive again in her mind and she separates herself from Rajan. She says to him, “Forgive me Rajan. That one dark moment grips me every time, and I become stiff like wood” (101). Proving Ratti’s apprehension true, Rajan turns out to be a replica of her childhood rapist when he says, “I’m not the one who will keep kissing your precious hands for years. I had always doubted whether you really were a woman” (102).

It is not easy task for her to overcome the deep-rooted trauma of being raped. It is not a matter of some moments. She is unable surpass this moment even after the constant struggle of many years. The more she tries to forget that pain, the more intense it becomes because “the life develops in spirals; it passes again and again at the same points but at different levels of integration and complexity” (Sartre, *Search For A Method* 106). Once again Ratti crosses the same point when she meets Sripat who is a married man. Sripat is devoid of any existential conflict, any feeling of friendship or animosity. Ratti is aware that he is not a being but just a male, virile and egoist. Keeping aside her conflict, Ratti too decides to be a female against a male. At last she decides to open up only as a female body, just flesh devoid of any desire. Perhaps this may prove helpful in washing away the black spot of frigidity from her body. She
separates forcefully her body from her being. “She admonished and silenced the Ratti within and found Sripat to be the sole end, the meaning she merely had to acknowledge. Sripat kissed Ratti while taking leave and was kissed in return. She stood there for a long time. Then she caressed herself. As if she too were precious, as if her body too had something to offer” (104). One evening, Ratti feels surprised when Sripat takes her to his house. She looked longingly at his house. She felt herself an outcast in his house which was looking like the hub of life. Each corner of the house is emitting the fragrance of completeness. She craves for the bliss of family life. Her happiness vanishes the moment when Sripat invites her to bed. She feels happy to see the house breathing with life, she craves for such a life but she knows that it is his wife Una’s territory and she does not want to trespass it. She wants to have sexual relation with him but doesn’t want to possess Una’s husband. The bed-room in the house and the person in that bed belong to Una only. He is exclusively Una’s possession at that time. She feels it would have been better if they had met outside Una’s territory. “Sripat, we had nothing to steal from each other. If only you hadn’t brought this moment into this room, perhaps . . . But Sripat, this was your home, yours” (108). The moment which Ratti was waiting for eagerly, instead of making her feel the warmth of her own body, leaves her frigid once again.

In spite of all her efforts she remains unable to have a healthy relationship in her life. She feels in desperation, “How often she has heard that her body lacked warmth. Fire. How often she had wondered where that heat lay hidden, that fire that could melt this ice. . . . but in these repeated encounters this stone Ahilya neither melts nor breaks. Neither shrinks nor expands” (99). Time is passing but she still sticks to the moment when her being was reduced to her body, just a physiological object which makes her feel that her body is nothing more than a stone. But this very realization proves that she is not a stone but a consciousness. Citing the example of a café waiter, Sartre says that he cannot be a café waiter in the sense that an inkwell is an inkwell or the glass is a glass, in the same way sexually frigid Ratti cannot be as frigid as a stone. Actually it is such that she ‘has to be’ and which she is not. It is her choice to turn herself as frigid and lifeless as a thing in order to save herself from being treated as a thing by the other. Her continuous struggle to find a right partner proves that she is conscious that she is not a stone. She feels that her life is “a long battle. A long battle every time. One who loses every time and denies defeat every time” (98). The desired thing i.e. the man who could return her sexual warmth by melting away her frigidity with the warmth of his love, is not the ultimate end of
desire. In fact, it is the concrete representation of a more fundamental desire i.e. a desire to find a coincidence with herself. As Ratti asks herself, “There must be something I wait for! Someone who must wait for me! But no. Ratti is waiting only for Ratti” (98).

The first part of the narrative is ‘the bridge’. It portrays Ratti’s relation with her friend Keshi and his wife Reema and their little son Kumu. All the three Keshi, Reema and Kumu are very dear to Ratti. In the whole world it is only these three who help her to forget her pain for some time. They are just like her family. Keshi and Reema understand her mental condition. She has no need to hide her real self from them. The title of the section ‘the bridge’ symbolizes the multiple roles played by Keshi, Reema and Kumu in Ratti’s life. These three members make a family which is a social institution. On the other hand, Ratti is leading an isolated life. In spite of living in society she feels herself alone because she has been doubly victimized in the society. So Keshi’s family works as a bridge between her and the society. It makes her feel the importance of family in the life of an individual which gives her a reason to continue the struggle of her life. Keshi’s happy family present a bright side of life and this hope in life work as a bridge to cross her abyss of darkness. Secondly, they actually work as a bridge through which Ratti reaches to the vast sky crossing her abyss of darkness i.e. Keshi actually becomes a link between Ratti and Diwakar.

Keshi and Reema are the archetype of a happily married couple. They live in Shimla and Ratti goes to them to spend some days in her vacations. The happiness of married life is writ large on their faces. They understand each other, tease each other and give space to each other. Both of them take care of Ratti in their own way. They try to emotionally support her without intruding in her wild zone. She goes out for a walk and even after getting dark when she does not reach home, Keshi comes out in her search:

When she reached the Summer Hill bend, a sudden light flashed in the row of black trees. When she recognized Keshi having torch in his hand, she said in a low voice, “I got late in returning.”

He saw her and smelt her past few hours – “It’s about to snow”

“Yes, it seems so.”

As they reached the gate, Ratti felt standing at a crossroads. She wanted to wrench her arm free and take the road that led away from the gate. But Keshi wasn’t
really holding her, just a caring touch on her arm. He rang the bell, and the door opened as if a dark cave had lit up.

Green jersey, red trousers, warm bright eyes on a sharp face, a teasing smile.

“So, you have found your friend finally”. (10-11)

It signifies a silent understanding between three of them. Keshi doesn’t feel the need of asking her the reason of being late. He directly peeps into her mind and gets the complete picture of the painful time she has spent in the evening. When Ratti is at the crossroads of her life, Keshi’s mere touch proves a great support to her. Keshi and Reema relation with each other gives a strange satisfaction to Ratti. “Hanging her coat on the peg, Ratti looked longingly at those four eyes. Where they stood, there were no barriers” (11). This longing look symbolizes her desire to be loved like Keshi and Reema. It appears that both of them give purpose to each other’s life. Kumu, their son, is the pivot of their life. Ratti too loves Kumu very much. Ratti’s looking longingly at Kumu and getting choked at his mention reflects her desire to be mother. When they were having their dinner, Ratti asked about Kumu and said with a choked throat, “Darling Kumu how sweet!” (14). The feeling that she has right on the child fills her with contentment. Her face brightens up while talking about Kumu’s lovable mischief:

Ratti said laughingly, “Kumu stops on the way every time he sees a bird flying. Reema, do you know Kumu ran on the snow with me yesterday!”

Keshi and Reema exchanged glances and laughed, “Even a child knows with whom to take liberties.”

‘Even’! Feeling happy Ratti picked up this right and hid it in her purse to cherish it.

Looking happily at Reema, she said, “I like your son very-very much.” (15)

Reema reads Ratti’s helplessness which she tries to hide in her smiles. She cannot understand why Ratti is torturing herself like this when she too can get married and enjoy the bliss of motherhood. She asks Keshi, “but what is she . . . who is she fighting with?” Keshi replies, “No one. Just Ratti herself” (16). It shows Ratti’s fight is not with patriarchy or with any social institution but with herself. She knows that a child can fill her lack. Sometimes she feels that she is using Kumu for her own selfish purpose. She looks hatefully at Kumu’s ayah when she comes to know that she is barren.
Ratti looked at *ayah* sharply. Why does Reema allow this cold, dry woman to fondle her precious? “Here, give the baby to me. I’ll put him to sleep.” She said and took the child into her arms. . . . Ratti looked at the *ayah* with strange, searching eyes. Then a tremor ran through her body. Why are these two barren women standing here by this child? She must ask Reema tomorrow to turn both of them out tomorrow. (26)

Ratti’s barrenness is not a physical but metaphysical state. Had she accepted Jainath’s proposal who imagines her as the mother of his five sons, she too could have enjoyed the bliss of motherhood. But she turns him down because she feels that it is just another way to use her body. Her desire to be a complete being overpowers her desire to be a mother. She does not want to produce a child at the cost of the totality of her being. She desires someone as Keshi and Reema are to each other. Both of them accepted each other as freedom. Ratti tells Reema, “Keshi does not let you feel otherwise, that is the greatest bliss in itself” (31). The marital bliss they are enjoying makes her feel an outsider: “Oblivious to everything else in the room – the shining red apples, the glow of the lamp, and even Ratti’s presence – Keshi’s eyes embraced Reema. Ratti started laughing aloud, then suddenly shrank into herself. She is outside this conversation, outside all doors” (15). Reema takes care even of her smallest need like putting hot-water bottle in her bed. Reema’s goodness brings to her mind the label of ‘not a good girl’ imposed upon her. This thought sharpens her pain: “Ratti is not a good girl. Ratti is not a woman. Just a damp log that gives out acrid smoke when it burns. . . .As Keshi and Reema’s footsteps faded away towards their bedroom, tears streamed down her cheeks. Ratti tried to summon up one face, just one name she could call out to. But the crowd of faces got out of her ‘focus’ and kept hanging before her eyes like a bolt left by time” (17-18).

The nature of relationship among the three i.e. Ratti, Reema and Keshi is not clearly stated anywhere in the text. Sometimes it appears that they were friends before their marriage and thus Reema too has a direct relation with Ratti. As when Reema makes a reference to Nathuakhan, Ratti feels that Reema has stepped out of Keshi’s zone for the first time. Incomplete reference to the times they have spent together hints at the inevitable absurdity of life. Three of them have some ambiguous relationship. Sometimes it becomes difficult for Reema to understand the relationship between Ratti and Keshi. “Reema asked Ratti like a friend, “There’s always some tension between both of you. What’s that, Ratti?,” Ratti said after some time, “You
must be right, Reema. I feel here strange sometimes. Sometimes good too. But then everything put together makes me sad also” (23). Without taking her words in negative sense Reema tries to soothe Ratti: “Everyone has the right to desire what they want,” Ratti replied, “it’s not a question of desiring Reema, but of being able to desire” (22). It shows that it is her own lack which affects her relationships which are very dear to him. She feels strange in being there because she feels herself an outsider in a happy family. She feels good because she finds warmth of love there and it is her own lack which makes her sad. Both Reema and Keshi understand Ratti’s emotional conflict but Keshi wants her not to torture herself like this. He says to her, ‘. . . . it’s futile to constantly fight yourself. It is always good to fight keeping yourself outside,’ Ratti said angrily, ‘You know many things Keshi but not this’” (24). Once on being asked by Keshi what she is thinking, she says bitterly, “You can never understand what I am thinking. Neither of you” (28). What both Keshi and Reema want from Ratti is to come out of her past and stop torturing herself. They want her to come out of her past and move ahead. Reema tries to convey her point of view to Ratti, “‘Keshi always says, Ratti should look ahead.’ A hollow laugh from Ratti, ‘But where is my ‘ahead’ dear Reema? I must only look at the images that flit back and forth before these eye, that’s all. I don’t have any future. Nothing lies ahead for me’” (34-35). According to Sartre, “Every man is defined negatively by the sum of total of possibles which are impossible for him; that is, by a future more or less blocked off” (Search For A Method 95). Ratti too defines herself in terms of the possibility of marriage and motherhood which she feels more or less are blocked for her. Reema feels that she is not being just to herself but she does not feel so. This is the conflict between the two modes of being. Keshi and Reema perceive her as being-in-itself who has fled her freedom by not utilizing the opportunities available to her. But their perception is wrong as she is a being-for-itself who is conscious of her nothingness. It is only because of her repeated failure, the feeling that she is left with no possibility in her life overpowers her. She is aware of this temporary stagnation in her life. She says that she does not feel like going back so she is searching some such place where she can hide one Ratti and take the other along with her on the train:

Keshi held her gaze steadily -

“Everyone has two selves, don’t they, Ratti?”

Ratti abruptly got up and started walking out, then swung around mid-step and came back. “Why do you keep trying to define me for myself? So coldly,
callously . . . Why do you always type me out and then leave typed-copies for me to read . . . . Ratti shook her hand helplessly. “Oh what I am saying . . . why I am saying it - both of you will gauge even that . . . . Whenever you look at me like that, I feel as if I am undergoing the postmortem” (40)

Ratti’s relationship with them is beyond the limits of social labeling. She feels a strange intimacy with them, exercises her right on them, loves and fights too with them. Their relationship is as complex as her own being. Symbolically, Keshi, Reema and Kumu stand for Ratti’s other mode of being i.e. being-for-itself, her possibilities which she will soon realize in her meeting with Diwakar.

The third part of the narrative is entitled ‘sky’ which is a symbol of endless vastness, freedom and light. It is a portrayal of Ratti’s coming into the light of her possibilities out of the darkness of her horrible past. It depicts her union with Diwakar as a freedom is assimilated into the other freedom. Keshi and Reema become a bridge through which Diwakar enters her life. He used to deliver Keshi and Reema’s messages to Ratti but one day he calls her for himself. The only thing Diwakar knows about Ratti is that she used to live in the same room in which he is staying in Keshi’s house. Sharing his feelings with her, he says:

I don’t know what happened and how, but my quest for you began from that very moment. I knew you weren’t there in that room any more . . . . yet, whenever I closed my eyes, I felt as if I had entered through one door and left by another.
Sometimes I saw your reflection in the window pane. (117)

Diwakar’s quest for Ratti is the concretization of the contingency of existence which cannot be deduced logically. The question ‘Why does he start feeling her presence everywhere’ cannot be answered logically but it does not mean that he can avoid his responsibility. Whether to listen to his feeling or not, to act on the basis of his feeling or not depends upon him entirely. He can choose to interpret his feelings the way he wants. He takes it as a hint towards a puzzle which he desires to solve. He feels that Ratti is someone whom he is searching.

Firstly, Ratti is not able to accept him. She tries her best to turn him away by talking to him in a negative tone:

“Reema and Keshi must have given you my biodata by now. How old am I, With how many patches I have covered my body.”
“Hey, why are you hacking at me like this?” Diwakar’s voice was thick with reproof.

Ratti chuckled, “Just for effect.”

“No. You are doing it to hurt.”

Ratti relaxed herself, “Let it be so, Diwakar. One who has got used to getting hurt wants to hurt, to wound others sometimes.” (114)

But her apparent negativity does not dishearten Diwakar. He tells her that she is not actually as bitter as she presents herself to be. He says that she deliberately talks about her in a particular way always to keep the other away from herself:

“Ratti, you’ve hemmed yourself in with barbed wire. And standing within it, you keep warning outsiders – Beware, don’t come near! There are thorns here, sharp thorns!”

Listening it, Ratti kept on laughing for a pretty long time.

“Do you know Diwakar, you have hit upon Ratti’s secret telephone number.” (115)

Ratti likes his talk but her past betrayals don’t let her move ahead. She has lost faith that she can find any happiness. She says to Diwakar, “. . . I’ve experience only of losing. I cannot remember what it’s like to gain” (118) but Diwakar is different from all the men she met earlier. Instead of imposing his love on her, he requests her to give him a chance. He does not want to forcefully snatch something from her: “Let me enter your world, Ratika. I won’t demand anything you are not ready to give” (118) and Ratti welcomes him in her world. In this relation there is no subject or object. Both Ratti and Diwakar are the free beings who respect the other’s freedom.

“Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible. . . . Man does not exist first in order to be free subsequently; there is no difference between the being of a man and his being-free” (Sartre, Being and Nothingness 49). It is through human freedom that nothingness, simply speaking, a feeling that I am not what I am, comes into the world. But this nothingness is not revealed by reason but by an irrational fundamental experience such as anxiety. Defining anguish Sartre states, “It is in anguish that man gets consciousness of his freedom . . . . it is in anguish that freedom is in question for itself” (Being and Nothingness 53). In the same way, Ratti gets conscious of her freedom through anguish when all her experiences from past to her
present day start floating in her eyes. The thought that Diwakar has come in her life when she has crossed the prime of her age makes her cry but soon she consoles herself, “Ratika, you have fought your battle head held high. You haven’t turned against yourself with bitterness. Even when friendless, you didn’t make enemy of friendship. You are a good girl. Sweet and Brave. Asad. The same chiseled face, even after all these years” (120). She is happy that at last she has met someone who loves her being and not her body, she wants to meet him but at the same time she feels that the moment of meeting someone has passed and she regrets her lost years. She spends three hours in make-up because she wants to look fresh in front of Diwakar but the feeling of intruding into his married life causes her anxiety. Sartre says about anguish, “My being provokes anguish to the extent that I distrust myself and my own reaction in that situation” (Being and Nothingness 53). After the three hours of make-up she feels ready to meet Diwakar and when he actually comes, she does not feel like even talking to him. She feels that all her efforts proved useless. She says to Diwakar:

‘. . . . now nothing will work. I don’t feel like Ratti anymore. Just an endless stretch of barren no man’s land,’ then she tells him about her horrible dream, ‘I was waiting for you after packing up when a strange, unfamiliar room floated before my eyes. I saw you standing in that room and a woman’s anchal besides you. I also saw that an eagle swooping on the room through the window.’ (122-123)

In this image she associates herself with the eagle which has attacked his married life. This anguish is the result of her feeling of responsibility, “I am responsible for myself and for everyone else” (Existentialism and Human Emotions 18). Not only Ratti but Diwakar too feels this anxiety. “He wanted to prove her wrong but remembering the conflict of a few hours ago, he gave in” (123). Both Ratti and Diwakar are trapped in their respective situations. Their anxiety is the outcome of their deep existential conflict. Understanding Ratti’s conflict Diwakar says to her, “Whatever is happening in that common threshold, let that happen. Don’t hold back yourself, Ratika. . . . No truth is absolute anywhere. The room that you saw with your inner sight was a room in my house, it is true. But it is also true that your nearness fills me with a joy that I’ve never felt before. I want to make love to you. Will you . . . ?” (123).

Ratti accepts his proposal. Diwakar’s touch returns the warmth of her body and she feels alive again. Love is, undoubtedly, a desire to possess another person’s body, but a body itself is
possessed by the partner’s freedom. Diwakar loves her not only as a body but a body identified with her consciousness which makes her feel existing as a freedom not as a physiological object only. “Diwakar gently kissed her forehead, her hair, “Just relax, Ratti. Let us love each other. We don’t love because we should not love. We desire, in fact, desire itself, Ratti!” (128). It is altogether a new experience for her, “You have washed away my curse, Diwakar” (130).

They are not only beings-for-themselves but beings-for-other too and are answerable to them for their actions. Diwakar wants to live with Ratti but he is married to Preeti. Socially he is not free to enter into a relationship with any other woman except his wife but existentially he is free to create his own values. He knows that his relationship with Ratti would affect his married life but he is ready to take the plunge. His duty towards Preeti can be explained logically. He should love her because she is his wife but his relationship with Ratti can’t be described or understood through reasoning. It is based on an intuition which is free from the rigidity of pre-conceived norms and notions. While explaining the nature of love Plato says in The Symposium, “No one can suppose that it is mere physical enjoyment which causes the one to take such intense delight in the company of the other. It is clear that soul of each has some other longing which it can’t express, but can only surmise and obscurely hint at” (Plato 63). This unknown and inexpressible realm leads to the realization of self. This journey of the realization of the self is so deep and unconventional that the known world must come to an end. This ‘unknown and inexpressible’ becomes the base of relationship between Ratti and Diwakar which lead them to the wholeness of the being. In contemporary society, marriage is solely considered an institution of regulating sexuality but this is limited definition of marriage. Even when the institution of marriage developed in Hindu religion, its aim was not merely physical pleasure but spiritual advancement. Hindu marriage can be defined as a religious sacrament in which a man and woman are bound in permanent relationship for physical, social and spiritual purposes. So physical union is not whole but only a part of marriage and this instinct should be inspired by spiritual union not by carnal lust. So marriage is more a matter of personal satisfaction than social interference. No doubt institution of marriage gives an answer to our emotional and bodily needs but “…there is no way of ensuring that love will be found within the confines of marriage….For that matter, no sanction, however stern can prevent a husband or wife from falling in love with someone to whom they are not married” (Chesser 126). That’s why Diwakar says that it is Ratti whom he had been searching for so long. In present situation his marriage is
his facticity but he has freedom to interpret this facticity. In spite of being caught in a situation, he is a *pour-soi*, a being-for-himself and so free to choose anything. At last he chooses not to continue a relationship in which he feels alone. He chooses to convey his decision to his wife and she takes it very calmly which signifies that perhaps she too is conscious of the complexities of human relationships. She prefers to let him go than to exercise her possession over his body.

On the other hand, Ratti too finds her complement in Diwakar. He not only liberates her from the horrid memories of rape but sparks in her the desire to be mother. Her dream in which she is searching some pearl in high desolate plateaus symbolizes her desire to become mother of Diwakar’s child. He enters as a ray of hope in Ratti’s hopeless life. Her dream signifies her desire to move ahead. She says to Diwakar:

“Can’t we grow a small plant here together?”

“But Ratika, there are only barren rocks here. Where will our sapling take root?”

“Hey! Don’t you know even this much. I am here – the earth.” (139)

She imagines a happy family life with Diwakar but she knows that he already has a family and, thus, she is not related to him only but his wife also. Her refusal to marry him signifies her sense of responsibility towards his wife, and her own desire to be with him out of love not out of the sense of obligation. She says to Diwakar:

That’s what I have been telling myself, Diwakar. It’s a big thing to love, but not big enough for me to destroy what is between you and Preeti. . . . No, Diwakar. I don’t want to usurp anything. You are like water flowing under a bridge and are bind with your banks. And I . . . . I am only supposed to cross that bridge. (141)

Ratti decides to keep herself away from his married life. Her union with Diwakar is only an external aspect of her desire to unite Ratti with Ratti i.e. desire to achieve a totality of being. It is in her clash with the other characters, shaped by external forces, that Ratti, the free girl, who shapes herself from within, emerges as a being-for-itself and ultimately, she is transformed into herself.

3. The Basic Thesis

The main formulation that one can arrive at after this long discussion is that it is not the social norms which control human freedom and codify human desires but the human desires to freedom which modify the already existing social norms and create the new values. The protagonists in the above discussed narratives belong to the mainstream society but they refuse to
follow its code of conduct unquestioningly. Their desire is not to challenge or change the social system but to understand it in relation to their particular situations. Their particular perception of it sometimes turns out to be contradictory to the existing system of thought which appear shocking and unacceptable to the custodians of so-called social morality. But instead of creating chaos, this dialectics of desire and freedom opens the door of a new world where the observance of norms and values is the result of conscious choice and not the social obligation.