Chapter III

Family Concerns

As long as the 'family' is felt as permanent, much else can be impermanent.

RD Laing

3.1. Introduction – Family in the Indian Context

Speaking of the comparative immutability of certain civil structures in India, like the family, the subaltern historian Partha Chatterjee, in his essay, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman Question', has related it to the agenda of nationalism, which sought the 'selective appropriation of western modernity' (Sangari and Vaid 1989:238). (Colonisation in India, which has significantly altered the outside, material world – the 'political' society that Gramsci distinguishes, and has brought in western institutions of governance and administration, could not touch the inner and spiritual core of society.) (So, because of India's rich, varied, and ancient pre-colonial culture, civil structures like family and community endured, pointing to the concerted preservation of indigenous structures.)
Colonialism, which as Memmi says ‘turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it’ (Ashcroft et al 1995:185), did try to alter these structures in the guise of social reform, especially after the 1857 Movement, and did offset some lasting changes in the fabric of Indian social mores. 19th century nationalist social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy and reformist organisations like the Arya Samaj and the Brahma Samaj were supportive of these reforms. And, it was largely due to the active support received from indigenous intellectuals right down to Gandhi and Nehru that the new reformist laws of the British government could usher in social consciousness against practices like Sati and untouchability. But, the resistance to these changes was also very strong, since the need was felt to

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\begin{align*}
\text{protect, preserve and strengthen the inner core of the national} \\
\text{culture, its spiritual essence. No encroachments by the coloniser} \\
\text{must be allowed in that inner sanctum.}
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(Sangari and Vaid 1989:239)

Thus, the identification of the family with the nation is not accidental: both are viewed as repositories of culture; hence, both need to be preserved. When Partap Sharma in *Days of the Turban* declares that ‘the family is the strongest, the most unassailable unit in the Punjab’ (Sharma 1986:174), he could well be speaking about the primacy of the family in the entire nation. Culture, therefore, emerges as the link between family
and the nation, and the essence of nationhood. The idea of hegemony—
'where the influence of ideas, of institutions, and of other persons, works
not through domination but by what Gramsci calls consent' (Said 2001:7)
is ingrained within the system of the family, and can form an effective
model for the construction of the nation. It is for this reason that the family
emerges as the inner world, the sanctum that has to be cocooned in order
to protect it from the outer world; if the family remains unassailable, it can
remain the repository of the 'spiritual essence' of the nation.

In such a scenario, the individual as individual becomes suspect,
and he/she comes to be identified as a part of the larger mechanism of
family, society, community, class and caste. Further, as Geeta Somjee
points out in Narrowing the Gender Gap (1989):

Unlike the individualised economic and political society of the
west, the Indian experience of associated living and acting, through
various ascriptive groups such as family, caste, neighbourhood,
village etc. remained, by and large, a part of its continuing
experience.

(Somjee 1989:x)

So, it is not surprising that the Indian English novel from its
inception, in Bankim Chandra's Rammohan's Wife, foregrounds the
family as the major social unit on which the action unfolds since it is seen
as the 'site for play of the deepest emotions and sentiments in human life'
(Shah 1998:2). From the work of the three pioneering Indian English novelists, Raja Rao, R K Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand, to women writers like Shashi Deshpande, themes ranging from the problems of domestic v/s public life, the status of women within the family set-up, the repressive strategies employed by the family to keep individuals, especially women, 'in place', the struggle of the individual to overcome the pressures and strictures of the family have been explored. As pointed out by Meenakshi Mukherjee

The Indian novelist had to operate in a tradition-bound society where ... a man's ... life was mapped out by his family or his community or his caste.

(Mukherjee 1985:7)

A major difference, however, between the earlier novels and the novels of the 1980s, is that the earlier novels acknowledge the concept of the individual, the 'new' novel views the family as a holistic unit, which fits into other social units, and its major concern is to fit in with the other hierarchical units of caste, community and the nation. In fact, the family becomes a metaphor for the nation itself, and the survival/disintegration of the one is symptomatic of the survival/disintegration of the other. Thus, these novels do not depict the travails of a single individual - since 'individual' is supposed to be an imported western concept, - but they
delve deeper into the life of an entire multigenerational *parivaar* which has been, to use Rushdie’s well-worn phrase ‘handcuffed to history’.

### 3.2. Family and National Chronicles

Family, therefore, in the novels of the 1980s, becomes the nation in microcosm, and histories of families run parallel to the history of the nation, resulting in chronicles both of family and the nation, even if the term ‘chronicle’ is taken in its simplest form as defined in the Chambers Universal Learners’ Dictionary as ‘a record of (esp. historical) events in order of time’. Since the national history depicted encompasses colonial as well as post-colonial times, it is contained within the parameters of a multigenerational narrative, and the family that emerges is the extended joint family – a unit that is basic to the understanding of the social structures of India. Thus, the duration of novels like *Midnight’s Children, The Shadow Lines, The Great Indian Novel* and *A Fine Family* is from the 1880s to around 1978 and they tell the story of about three generations. *The Trotternama*, which is more ambitious in scope, goes back further into the past and begins with the advent of French campaigns circa 1720, and recounts the history of seven generations of the Trotter family. *The Trotternama* and *Raj* end in 1947 with the independence of India. *Days of the Turban* and *English, August*
restrict themselves to the happenings of a single year, 1982, but English August goes back into the colonial past to retrieve the narrative of an Englishman who is buried in the a-historical Madna. Historical concerns remain paramount in Days of the Turban, since the Chibber family traces its ancestry in the origins of the Muhiyal community, and takes a look at pre-independence times through the eyes of the patriarch Babaji, whose experiences of partition document the tragedy that overtook families at the time. A Suitable Boy, set in 1951-1952, does not move vertically in time, but nevertheless, takes up in its broad historical sweep the saga of four multigenerational families and their attempts to come to terms with changing political, social and historical developments in the four to five years after partition and independence. Given this duration and dimension of the novels, it is not surprising that at least four of the novels are prefaced by genealogical family trees drawn up by the novelists for ready reference.

3.3. The Concept of the Joint family and the Novel of the 1980s.

In India, the family has always been identified with the joint family – emotionally and ideologically, at least, if not in actual physical terms. Even with the so-called disintegration of the joint family with the march of industrialisation and westernisation, the ‘ideal’ has remained
intact. And in the novels of the 1980s, where it may be seen as consisting of a number of generations, either living together or not, but bound by a centralised patriarchal authority, it becomes an important binding factor in the multigenerational family chronicle.

When the grandmother in The Shadow Lines justifies her decision to ‘rescue’ the estranged, elderly Jethomoshai from Bangla Desh and bring him to India, in these terms, she is giving voice to the accepted centrality of the joint family in India:

It doesn’t matter whether we recognise each other or not. We’re the same flesh, the same blood, the same bone, and now at last, after all these years, perhaps will be able to make amends for all that bitterness and hatred

(Ghosh 1997:129)

Leading sociologists, like Shah (1998) have pointed out that this spirit of jointness prevails throughout Indian society, cutting across differences of caste, occupation, property, education, rural/urban community, and religion; and the joint family remains seminal to an understanding of the Indian ethos. In many of the novels, the depiction of the family amounts to a glorification of the institution of the joint family, while it is problematised in some of the narratives.

The family is overtly glorified in novels like A Fine Family, A Suitable Boy, Days of the Turban and The Trotternama, in each of
which the travails faced by it only serve to strengthen it and to prove its remarkable resilience, which ultimately ensures its survival. It emerges not only as the repository of values, traditions and customs, but also as the strongest support system available to the individual family members, because of its inveterate sense of bonding during times of crisis. The family takes on the qualities of almost a kin-group in order to ward off disruptive forces. This is as obvious in the rallying around of the entire ‘clan’ when Balbir in *Days of the Turban* has to be rescued from the clutches of the terrorists in the Golden Temple, or when Maan in *A Suitable Boy* has to re-integrated into the family fold after his baptism by pain. (The message in these novels seems to be, that it is family solidarity and oneness that can help the individual to overcome the traumas triggered off by social and political violence and by displacement.)

But this valorisation of the family does not take place in *Midnight’s Children, The Great Indian Novel* and *The Shadow Lines*, all of which in different ways seek to subvert the ‘grand family’ myth. The sacrosanctness of the multigenerational family comes in for disruptive mockery in *Midnight’s Children*, when Rushdie proceeds to dismantle the elaborate, almost impeccable pedigree that has been built up for Saleem Sinai. *The Great Indian Novel* carries this subversiveness further, when it works out the genealogy for the rulers of modern India.
and Pakistan by drawing irreverent parallels with the 'grand' family of the

Mahabharata. Like Rushdie’s novel, it encompasses within it the roles of political manoeuvrings, illegitimacy, polygamy and polyandry in ensuring the survival of the race and family. Similarly, in Raj, no amount of intrigue, compromise and expediency is too much if it is necessary for the salvaging of the family and its ‘honour’. In The Shadow Lines, this subversiveness takes an extremely tragic turn in the fact that it is in the attempt to save the oldest member of the family that the disaster of Tridib’s massacre in the communal riot takes place. In these novels, as against those which portray an unproblematic idealisation of the family, it is seen as an artificial and basically, social construct.

3.3.1. Patriarchy and the Joint Family

The joint family ideology is marked by its strong patriarchal base. Patriarchy, as a concept and a pattern of structuring human relationships in society and family, an ideology which has the ‘power to mould women and men as social beings’ (Greene and Kahn 1994:6) is not peculiar to India; but, the family remains the citadel of patriarchy, and in the joint family these strictures are more well-defined and formalised (Ramu 1989). Relations within the joint family are extremely formal and hierarchical, determined by age, gender and seniority. The ultimate authority in the
joint family is vested in the oldest male member, who delegates authority to the other male members, creating a hierarchy in which sons hold positions depending on their age and relationship, and sons’ wives form their hierarchy depending on their husband’s position in the male hierarchy (Gore 1968). So, apart from determining the relationship of men and women, the joint family system is also very clear about the manner in which the relationship between men and women is defined. As Leela Dube points out, ‘...women and men are turned into gendered subjects and thus implicated in the maintenance and reproduction of a social system.’ (Dube 1997:2)

An interesting delineation of the joint family ethos is worked out in Days of the Turban. The two sons of the old patriarch Babaji – Gyan Chand and Khushiram – have established separate households in two neighbouring villages, Chamkalan and Jagtara. But, in spite of the physical distance between the two households, the absolute authority wielded by Babaji is unmistakable. Gyan Chand, whose son is well settled in Germany, and who himself is in his fifties, is totally subservient to his father; Balbir’s father, Khushiram, though more outspoken, maybe because he lives at a distance from his father, nevertheless, has to report every major and minor matter to the patriarch – and every decision, from the proposed marriage of his daughter Aadran to the recovery of the
money stolen by Balbir, to the planning of the elaborate rescue operation of Balbir from the clutches of the terrorists, is taken by Babaji. All others – including the globe-trotting Satyavan and the migrant Raskaan – have to fall in line. Similarly, in *A Fine Family*, Bauji is the equivalent of Babaji – and the novel is a narrative of primarily his concerns and his glorification. He belongs to the ‘educated-professional class’, but within the family fold he continues to operate as the unquestioned power centre, who caters to the needs not only of his immediate family (wife, married son, daughter-in-law, grandchildren, unmarried daughters), but even of his nephew Karan, and a whole hoard of relatives; thus, his family dinners are open affairs:

Apart from the immediate family, there were nephews, grandsons, aunts, friends of nephews, friends of friends and a few others whom he did not recognise.

(Das 1990:43)

As the benevolent patriarch, he is seen as responsible for the welfare of the entire clan, and in return, he commands respect and reverence till the very end.

*A Suitable Boy* reveals varying degrees of patriarchal control in the four families it depicts: Mahesh Kapoor, MLA and minister, is the power centre in his household and his two sons, Pran and Maan are required to fit into the hierarchical pattern. Pran, married to Savita with
the blessings of his father, does set up an independent household, but his links with the larger family remain as strong as ever. Maan, the younger son feels constrained in the family set up, but by the end of the novel, he is tamed to become a part of it. The Mehra family, nominally headed by Rupa Mehra, finds the support of a male patriarch at moments of crisis. It is her father who is consulted on major issues and when he refuses to attend Savita's marriage, the reins are taken over by Mahesh Kapoor himself. What needs to be pointed out at this stage is that the joint family does not only vest power and authority in the oldest male member of the family, it also places the responsibility of its welfare squarely on his shoulders, and an abdication of this responsibility is seen as an aberration or worse. Thus, Arun Mehra, the oldest Mehra son, draws flak in the novel, because it is his responsibility that is being taken up by the default 'father-figures' since he has chosen to ignore it and set up his own independent household at Calcutta. However, the sense of power he enjoys, nevertheless, is evident in his unashamed bullying of his younger brother, Varun, and the authority with which he tries to persuade his sister, Lata, against marrying the plebeian Haresh. The Chatterjee household, on the other hand, is a highly westernised one, and to that extent, the patriarchal authority is dormant, – in what appears to be one of the most stereotyped projections of the novel, that westernisation leads to loosening
of family ties and patriarchal control. The Baitar family, on the other hand, points out clearly that the structure and ideology of Muslim families is not different in kind from Hindu families. The two sons, Firoz and Imtiaz are not only obedient, but, subservient to their father, whose very temperance and mildness are the product of a quiet authority he radiates by virtue of his position within the family set-up.

In the two obviously political novels, Raj and The Great Indian Novel, power, again, is concentrated in the hands of a father figure. In The Great Indian Novel, Gangaji is the source and perpetrator of all authority – the centralised power-wielder, who then disseminates it among his ‘sons’ – Dhritarashtra, Vidur and Pandu. When he loses control, the collapse of Hastinapur becomes inevitable. The sons not only draw authority from him, they nurture it and preserve it for him, too. Revolt misfires, - as in the case of Pandu and Mohammed Ali Karna; disintegration sets in with his loss of authority, leading to disastrous consequences like the partition of the nation.

3.3.2. The Family as Support System

The hegemony of the family in all societies is linked to the fact that the family is viewed as the protective space for individuals; in India, the family emerges as the main support system in times of crisis – and all
members of the family are expected to do their mite to help individuals in
distress tide over difficult times:

A crisis situation created by such events as death, illness
and hospitalisation brings the members of the family together.
They share each other's grief by providing emotional support in
many ways... When a member of a family is in distress, other
members are expected to help.

(Shah 1998:103-104)

The overt glorification of the family in the novels of the 1980s highlights
its role as support system for the individual. Thus, in A Suitable Boy, the
task of finding a suitable match for Lata is not the concern only of her
mother or her brothers, but of the entire network of affinal relations.
Again, in the same novel, when the 13-year old Tapan is bullied at his
boarding school, it is his otherwise irresponsible brothers, Dipankar and
Amit who come to his rescue. Even when the victim involved is not as
innocent as Tapan, the family closes its ranks to form a protective shield
around him: Maan, who has brought disgrace to his family by his
association with the courtesan Saeeda Bai and by his murderous attack on
a close family friend, Firoz, does not lose the support of his family. His
father, brother and even his brother's sister-in-law, Lata, visit him in jail,
and plan his defence systematically. His brother, Pran, even in these
difficult circumstances agrees to carry a message from him to Saeeda.
Finally, when Firoz does not depose against him in court, it is only
because of the strong emotional bonding between the families of Mahesh Kapoor and the Nawab of Baiter. Maan, the rebel, is not given up as a bad cause, but he is brought back into the family fold by virtue of their support and understanding. When Balbir in *Days of the Turban* is kept a prisoner in the Golden Temple, Babaji ropes in the whole family, - even those members who are settled abroad to include them in 'Operation Shivaji', to save him from the clutches of the terrorists.

But it is Gurcharan Das who unabashedly glorifies the 'fine' family in his novel, which tells the story of super successful characters like Bauji and Arjun who reach great heights in their chosen professions on the strength of their initiative and drive which they derive from a strong family background and tradition. The subterranean message of this novel seems to be that it is only such 'fine' families who can overcome the traumas of displacement and social and political violence. And, that the strongly rooted family simply cannot perish. When Arjun, the protagonist is arrested for four months under MISA (Maintenance of Internal Security Act) during the Emergency, even though the old patriarch, Bauji is dead, the rest of the family – his father Sewa Ram, his mother Tara and his wife Priti - come together in an act of symbolic moral courage; it is significant that this bonding leads to the reconciliation of Priti and Arjun, and the bond is further cemented by the birth of a daughter to them.
This protective role of the family assumes great significance in the light of the fact that it also severely restricts the space allowed to individuals, especially with reference to women, who are expected to fall in line with the customary roles assigned to them. The impact of the family as ‘protecting unit’ on women will be explored at length in a later section of this chapter. What needs to be noted is that even men are subject to restrictions within the family circuit, and to keep the family protected and whole they, too, are required to give up their claim to any notions of individualism.

3.3.3. Individualism and the Family

Individualism, in the context of the joint family is viewed as a disruptive, western influence, which poses a threat to its ideology and perhaps its very survival. Sociologists like A M Shah (1998) have pointed out that the individual has no place in the joint family. Geeta Somjee in her study of women in the family set-up in India, *Narrowing the Gender Gap* relates the suspicion with which individualism is viewed in India with the fact that India did not ever go through ‘a process of economic and political individuation...and the Indian experience of individualism remained largely at the level of the intellectual and spiritual values’ (Somjee 1989:x). Thus, individual freedom, in the Indian set-up,
traditionally, works within the framework of liberation of the soul in religious terms: like Meerabai, it is only the ascetic who can get away from social norms and strictures; but the ascetic, too, remains bound within the parameters of the order to which s/he subscribes.

This explains the fact that spiritual individualism, as when Jaya's mother renounces the world in Raj in the service of a higher power, is considered a positive value. Similarly, in A Fine Family, Sewa Ram is exempted from being subject to social judgement because of his spiritual inclinations and his association with and devotion to his Guru and the Ashram. His spartan life-style, as opposed to the opulent dreams of his wife Tara is not slighted, even though it is the cause of the life-long suppression of his wife. In fact, his way of life is given legitimacy by the fact that the errant Priti, after a wayward life, finds her peace in the same ashram. She is regenerated and absolved of her transgression – notably her elopement with Karan and her reportedly profligate life – after she embraces the spiritual way of life. With this one exonerating exception to individualism in the spiritual field, which even absolves a person from his/her family commitments, the focus is on the integration of the individual with the family and other social structures.

All the other characters who try to break out of family bonds and assert their individuality in any way are portrayed as errant and alienated,
who have to be tamed and brought back to the family fold. Agastya Sen, in *English, August*, totally cut off from family ties, isolated in Madna, with just letters forming the link between him and his father and uncle, becomes a victim of boredom and ennui leading him to give up his career with the IAS at the end. He says he is taking a year off ‘to discover himself’, but he remains rootless and alienated. Saleem Sinai, in *Midnight’s Children*, has his ears boxed when he declares himself to be a specially gifted individual, and he loses his hearing ability, rendering him, ironically, even less than a normal, average individual. On a different level, all the ‘special’ midnight’s children, ‘gifted’ as they see themselves to be, do not fulfil their destiny because they are unable to unite into a viable, coherent social structure. In *A Suitable Boy*, both Maan and Amit are rejected as suitable boys for Lata, because they are not typical family men – Maan because of his relationship with Saeeeda, and Amit, since, as a poet he is seen as irresponsible, especially, since he is unwilling to join the family business. Since Maan’s revolt against his family ethos is more drastic, it leads to deeper tragedy, - the death of his mother, his own imprisonment and the breach in the friendship between the Baitar and the Kapoor families. Tridib, in *The Shadow Lines*, the iconoclast who defies family norms has to pay with his death. The grandmother’s hatred for Ila, caught between two cultures is very palpable and it is as if she pays
the price for her individualism and her uprootedness with her unhappy marriage to Nick Price. Balbir, in *Days of the Turban*, is literally brought back into the family, both from Tarsem and the terrorists, and he is given only so much freedom as will teach him that his security and well-being lie in returning to the family fold. He is ‘allowed’ to leave the country after he is married off to a girl of the family’s choice. Even though *Days of the Turban* ends with Balbir’s assertion that he is merely using his marriage to ‘get away’, his unwilling attraction for his bride points to his possible acceptance of her in the near future. The transition from ‘Anyway, he wasn’t really concerned. He was going to ditch her. Just to fix the family,’ to ‘He chuckled. That was the family habit. They developed a sense of humour as their sense of responsibilities increased,’ to He felt somehow on *the threshold of a new maturity,* (italics added for emphasis) takes place in just two days and it is obvious that with his marriage, the domestication of Balbir is complete (Sharma 1986:384-385).

The individual, therefore is determined in terms of his/her relationships and the notion of individual freedom is merely, tolerated as an indulgence, only as long as it does not threaten the structures of family, caste, community and the nation. When an individual transgresses these structures, it can lead only to destruction and tragedy, as in the case of Rasheed in *A Suitable Boy*. Amit Chatterjee is tolerated because his
poetic aspirations have been accepted by his family. Arjun in *A Fine Family* can grow professionally, since he has inherited the values of merit and moral uprightness from his father Sewa Ram and his grandfather Bauji. The family, thus, adjusts to the aspirations of individuals only if they do not threaten its unity or its functioning.

This concern with the unity of the family is marked also by the excessive formality that is expected in family matters. As mentioned earlier, the hierarchical relations within a family are determined by age, gender and seniority. As Gore has pointed out, authority in the joint family is wielded according to seniority and a person who is older by so much as a few months enjoys a higher rank within the family (Gore 1968). So, Raskaan, in *Days of the Turban*, is expected to treat Satyavan, his cousin with deference, because of the marginal age difference between them. In *A Fine Family*, Tara cannot think of marrying Karan, since in the Indian tradition he is 'like her brother'. Later on, she herself is willing to accept even this tenuous link so that he can be resurrected as the maternal uncle (*mama*) for her son Arjun. *Raj* delineates the extremely formal ways which clearly set the norms for the behaviour expected of family members, in which even a courtesan is allotted her space in the family circle. When Jaya loses her father and brother, it is her father's brother who inherits his kingdom, and the duty of getting the daughter of
the family married falls on him, which he carries out in the most formal and ceremonious manner required. A very clear indication of this kind of formality is that many of the characters are not known by their names, - they are identified by their 'relation names' like Bhabho, Bhabhiji, Bauji, Babaji, Big Uncle, Thakumma, Jethomoshai. The higher a person is in the scale of age and seniority, the less likely it is that his or her name will be used, in deference to his/her position and the relationship.

3.3.4. Arranged Marriages and Family Concerns

Gore (1968) emphasises the idea that the two main strains in the joint family system arise from the possibility of the conjugal relationship becoming very strong and the difficulty of socialising the women members into developing a community of outlook and a sense of identity within the family group. A natural corollary of the joint family ethos is that like all other relationships, formality marks the relationship between men and women, especially in marriage. Fraternal and filial bonds have to be kept stronger than the conjugal one; closeness in the husband-wife relationship is severely restricted since it is seen as a threat to the unity of the joint family. Utmost stress is laid on the fact that the woman who marries into the joint family fits into an already established hierarchy. Of course, for the younger generation the degree of formality is substantially
decreased, when compared to the relationships between Mahesh Kapoor and his wife, Bauji and Bhabho, and Aadam Aziz and Naseem. Nevertheless, the family has to be protected against the disruptive influence of the closeness of the husband-wife unit – which would contain the seeds of the disintegration of the joint family and the rise of the nuclear family. The position of women in the family is largely determined by the subordination of the conjugal tie, which refuses to give a woman any position in the family until she becomes a mother, and a mother of sons, at that. The subordination of the conjugal tie and the segregation of the sexes are the two strategies employed by the joint family to keep itself intact.

This twin objective is achieved by the institution of the arranged marriage. The purpose of the arranged marriage is not the fulfilment of the individual, romantic longing, but procreation and the production of male heirs, so that the stability and continuity of the family is maintained. Alfred de Souza (1975) reiterates that arranged marriages become the norm in sex-segregated societies not only because of the non-availability of viable alternatives, but also because they ensure compatibility of life-styles of husband and wife within the framework of caste and religious norms and the traditional roles ascribed to men and women within the family.
Most of the important marriages in the novels are, therefore, arranged marriages; in *The Great Indian Novel*, Gangaji arranges the marriages of his wards Dhritharashtra, Pandu and Vidur. Even though old king Shantanu falls in love with Satyavati, the actual marriage can take place only when her father is satisfied that it is her children who will inherit the kingdom of Indraprastha. When Arjun falls in love with Shubhadra, Krishna, her brother arranges for their elopement. Draupadi becomes the common wife of the five Pandava princes because of the diktat of the mother, Kunti. Of course, relationships in the *Mahabharata* are much more complex than their ironed-out versions in *The Great Indian Novel*. But the underlying concern of all the relationships is the same – ensuring the patriarchal succession. *Raj*, too, displays the same compulsions; Jaya’s marriage is a political and familial convenience, and until the need for an heir arises, it hardly matters whether it is consummated or not. As Prince Pratap, her husband tells her

> Ours is strictly a marriage of convenience, Jaya Devi. Should the necessity for children ever arise, I am sure we can both rise to our duty, but until then...

(Mehta 1993:190)

Marriages are arranged keeping in mind the status and requirements of the two families and as Bauji tells Tara in *A Fine Family*, stability is more important in marriage than love. So, even though she is attracted to the
flamboyant Karan, she cannot marry him or even ‘somebody like him’, because he does not have the steadiness or the discipline to provide for a family, which even the spiritually inclined Sewa Ram is presumed to have. **A Suitable Boy** begins with the ‘ideal’ marriage of Savita and Pran, and ends with the assertion of Rupa Mehra that she is on the lookout for a suitable match for her youngest son Varun. Central to the novel is the search for the ‘right’ boy for Lata; and it is Haresh who is deemed suitable because of his capacity for hard work, his stability, and his level-headedness, which would ensure a comfortable life for Lata rather than the romantic Kabir or the poet Amit. It doesn’t matter that Pran, Savita’s husband is asthmatic or excessively thin, or that Haresh is lower down in the social scale: their plus points are their pragmatism and their conventionality. In **Days of the Turban**, too, Balbir marries the ‘chosen’ girl, he thinks as an escape route, but the family views it as an insurance that he will not stray away from the family after he is domesticated by his marriage. In **Midnight’s Children**, the arranged-love marriages of Adam Aziz-Naseem, Mumtaz-Nadir Khan, Emerald-Zulfikar and Amina-Ahmed Sinai, are well within the conventions demanded by Muslim society – under close parental supervision and approval. Of course, some of these marriages may prove to be disastrous, but, at least, the objectives of
marriage, - stability and security of the family and the production of heirs for the larger family are fulfilled.

The preference for arranged marriages is sometimes carried to extreme limits, as in the case of two characters in Days of the Turban and Raj: Gulnari Kaur is engaged and is to be married to a photograph of her prospective husband since he is unable to come down from Canada to attend his own marriage. She, herself, doesn’t seem averse to the idea; as she says to Uday Singh:

It’s a good family. I would be married off some day. I might as well accept it and go there.

(Sharma 1986:58)

Jaya, in Raj, is actually married to the sword of Prince Pratap in his absence. Perhaps, it would be possible to dismiss these marriages as mere 'exotica' meant to cater to the taste for the oriental of the western or westernised reader. But their authenticity cannot be doubted as they are depictions of well-entrenched traditions in the Punjab and among the Rajputs. The fact that both Gulnari and Jaya both agree to this kind of symbolic marriage points to the total lack of choice for them as also to the complete cultural indoctrination, which may leave them a little uneasy, but does not induce them to reject such a tradition.
3.3.5. The Notion of Romantic Love

Romantic love, therefore, has no place in the joint family set up. It is viewed as a shaky foundation for a marriage and even after marriage, it is not encouraged. Thus, though, Savita and Pran do fall in love their familial roles and responsibilities take precedence, and very soon, they are more firmly entrenched in their roles as parents rather than as lovers. Amina Sinai has to teach herself to love her husband bit by bit, but the solidity of their marriages indicates that marriage is more about adjustments and co-operation rather than about love. Of course, romance does form an important aspect of all the novels. But, its depiction ranges from an excessively sentimental depiction in A Fine Family, to Vikram Seth’s semi-amused, semi-indulgent portrayal, to the more macabre and tragic perceptions of Partap Sharma and Amitav Ghosh, in whose novels it is presented as a transgression of the moral codes of society and a violation of the family and community codes of honour; a transgression which needs to be punished severely.

A Fine Family, perhaps, is the only novel which portrays the quintessential love story, in the relationship of Bauji and Anees, in which the beloved is elusive and unattainable, whose purity is never in doubt, who ennobles herself and finds fulfilment in nursing her wounded lover, serving him, saving his entire family during the troubled times of the
partition, and coming back to him at the time of his death, - making their relationship ‘a marriage of true minds’.
At other times, she remains hidden, as elusive as the perfume she wears, the mysterious lady behind the veil. As against this idealised relationship, in Das’s novel the Tara-Karan relationship is a non-starter and the Priti-Karan relationship leads to scandal and disillusionment. Priti and Arjun do manage a kind of ‘stable’ marriage, but Priti’s growing spiritual inclinations, which are a kind of penance for her earlier transgressions are also a threat to the stability of the family. And love marriages, - Priti-Arjun in A Fine Family and Arun-Meenakshi in A Suitable Boy - anticipate the truncated nuclear family. When the roots of the family are loosened in this way, its unity and integrity come under threat.

Romantic love also leads to the worst kind of individual transgression – sexual transgression, and the family and community codes of honour require that it be severely dealt with. Hence, in Days of the Turban, Uday Singh faces a violent death at the hands of his terrorist colleagues because he has dared to ‘elope’ with Gulnari Kaur. The terrorists even send the severed head of Uday Singh to the Ahluwalia family to assuage their thirst for revenge, and the Uday-Gulnari escapade leads to the massacre of an entire village. Gulnari, herself, can expiate for her crime only by honourably committing suicide, aligning herself with
the well-entrenched practice of ‘honour deaths,’ rampant in the Punjab. In
the stridently masculinist ethos of Days of the Turban, Partap Sharma
does not regard any of these happenings as aberrations; in fact, there is a
sense of pride associated with them. When Kulwanti seduces Balbir, she
is let off comparatively lightly, because it is impossible for her to disturb
the social balance by marrying him. When she dares aspire towards this
marriage Aadran, Balbir’s sister, in her well-institutionalised and
internalised patriarchal role rebukes her violently:

Aadran felt like crushing the dry chillies and throwing
the powder in Kulwanti’s eyes. She picked up a handful and flung
them back on the stringbed.

‘Sluts, that’s what the two of you have been. You and
that Gulnari.’ She turned to Kulwanti, her eyes blazing, but her
voice a hiss, ‘Get out! Get out of our house!’

(Sharma 1986:351)

Love leads to unproductive, carnal lust in the case of Meenakshi
and Billy Irani, cuckolding in the case of Arun and Meenakshi in A
Suitable Boy, deception and betrayal in Raj, (Jaya and Arun Roy), brutal
tragedy in the Tridib-May Price relationship and disillusionment and
unhappiness in the case of Ila and Nick Price in The Shadow Lines;
tragedy, again for the Nawab of Baitar and Saeeda Bai, Saeeda and Maan,
Firoz and Saeeda’s daughter in A Suitable Boy; a cool level-headed
rejection of Kabir and Amit by Lata is seen as a sensible decision, as also
the giving up of the Sardarni, Simran, when Haresh realises that marriage to her is impossible, since her parents have not relented even after five years. In *English, August*, the dowry-laden marriage of the Collector, Shrivastava is a success, but in a macabre incident, an ironically named Mohandas Gandhi has his arms cut off when he has a ‘fling’ with a tribal woman. In *The Great Indian Novel*, where the identification of the family with the nation is the strongest, it is carnal lust which forces the Maharajah of Manimar to sign away his kingdom to the Indian union, and puts Vidur on a firmer footing in their dealings.

There are just two exceptions to this unrelenting vision: Raskaan’s relationship with the German girl is connived at by the entire family in *Days of the Turban*, and in *A Suitable Boy*, Meenakshi’s sister seems to be headed towards a satisfying marriage with Hans, in spite of cultural and national differences.

In a subtle way, the ‘purity’ of the patriarchal joint family, is reflected in the concerns of nationhood; individualism and therefore individual relationships, which do not bear the stamp of approval by the centralised authority, the state or the family, come under suspicion. In the case of a novel like *Days of the Turban* which equates the honour of the family, not only with the honour of the nation, but, surprisingly, even with the concept of honour which the fundamentalists believe in, the role of
patriarchy as a central controlling principle is evident, and suppression of weaker sections like women follows naturally. That is why a novel, which is so blatantly pro-establishment as *Days of the Turban*, ironically, condemns the ideological stances of the terrorists, while at the same time celebrating them in the context of class, caste, tribe, gender and nation.

3.4. Gender Concerns

All the attributes of the joint family ideology discussed above - a centralised, patriarchal authority, a highly formalised, graded, hierarchical set-up, the subordination of the conjugal to the fraternal and filial ties – restrict the space that is available to women; women’s identity is defined and recognised strictly in terms of their relationship to the male members of the joint family. As Greene and Kahn point out, ‘gender is constructed in patriarchy to serve the interests of male supremacy’ (Greene and Kahn 1994:3) in all societies, and in such societies

> The oppression of women is both a material reality, originating in material conditions, and a psychological phenomenon, a function of the way men and women perceive one another and themselves.

(Greene and Kahn 1994:3)

This oppression is achieved by effectively silencing the voice of the woman, by allotting her only private space, by limiting her role to that of
bearer and nurture of children, by keeping tabs on her sexuality, all with a view to ensuring the 'purity' of lineage of a family or kin group and protecting the property rights of the family. In the process, the woman becomes a piece of property herself. As seen in the earlier section, the institution of the arranged marriage valorised in the novels of the 1980s, is not only a method of keeping the individual subordinated to a group, but is also a really effective strategy in the process of gendering the woman; it is tailor-made to achieve the objectives of keeping the women confined to the sphere of domesticity. The restrictions on women are two-fold: as individuals they have no space in the concept of the joint family, and as women they are under the control of men, who do not see themselves as individual either, but as mere functions in the hierarchy.

3.4.1. The 'Silencing' of the Women

Women, in the novels of the 1980s, reflect and share patriarchal ideologies to such an extent that, in effect, they appear to be non-existent, or at best, as perpetrators of masculinist concerns. When Helene Cixous maintains that 'woman is always on the side of passivity', she is pointing to more than the acceptance of women of the status quo; she is actually talking about the willing participation of women in, not only their
marginalisation, but actual decimation. A decimation which highlights the fact that in the patriarchal set-up a woman is not actually required:

In the extreme the world of 'being', can function to the exclusion of the mother. No need for mother – provided there is something of the maternal: and it is the father who acts as – is – the mother. Either the woman is passive; or she doesn’t exist.

(Lodge 1989:288)

So, in Days of the Turban and A Fine Family women are, almost, totally concealed from view. Even as mothers they are non-existent, except as shadowy figures in the background: Bauji’s wife, Bhabho, Balbir’s mother Bhabhi and the sisters of Tara. It is not surprising that none of these characters are given names, they are dimly recognised only in their roles. One of the sisters of Tara is killed in the partition riots, and her death is simply glossed over; and what happens to her other two sisters is not even mentioned: they simply disappear from the novel. Similarly, the mother in The Shadow Lines remains insignificant. Gandhari’s ‘blindness’ successfully segregates her from the outside world, and the near exclusion of women from the narrative in English, August indicates their dispensability in the society depicted. Even their role as mothers is minimalised as pointed out by Cixous. The depiction of these women seems to reinforce the observation made by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid in their introduction to Recasting Women that it ‘[shatters]
the post-colonial complacency about the improving status of women’ (Sangari and Vaid 1989:2).

3.4.2. Purdah

The ‘silencing’ of the women who exist on the periphery of these novels is reflected even in the important women characters, and its most significant expression is found in the delineation of the institution of purdah, which is integral to both Hindu and Muslim communities in the Indian joint family. In the broadest sense, purdah refers to ‘the concealment of women and the separation of the worlds of men and women’ (Jeffrey 1979:3). It may also be viewed as a complex attitude and as Uma Parmeshwaran states ‘a social norm whereby women live in seclusion, both from men and from the sphere of civic and public action’ (Jain and Amin 1998:33). In its most obvious manifestation it exists as a burqa worn by Muslim women, or a chaddar or veil covering the face and/or head of women in Hindu society. But as Jasbir Jain says:

Even if purdah is not manifest in the matter of clothing, it is perceptible in the unequal relationship that exists in various groups.

(Jain and Amin 1998:5)
Purdah, therefore becomes a symbolic term and it ranges from visible manifestations in dress and the presence/absence of women to invisible strategies, which seek to decimate the identity of women.

Among the novels studied, *Midnight’s Children*, *A Fine Family* and *A Suitable Boy*, depict purdah in its more visible form among muslims, while *Raj* is an extensive study of purdah among high caste Hindus. In *A Fine Family*, it is highly romanticised in the relationship of Bauji and Anees, and the burqa is presented as ‘a thing of beauty’ in itself, which is used to create romance, mystery and present unrequited love and fidelity for the inaccessible beloved. Most often, the romance of purdah is created by those who are outside the purdah situation (Jain and Amin 1998:viii). This is evident in the first meeting of Bauji and Anees:

As he was turning into Kacheri Bazar, he caught a glimpse of a veiled muslim woman. She was entirely covered by a burkha, which had slits through which her eyes could see the world. This by itself was not unusual. What caught his attention was the unmistakable and expensive scent that lingered behind her. He recognised the subtle fragrance. But the identity of the lady eluded him. The rich quality of the burkha confirmed that she was a woman of the upper class...He kept thinking of the tempting lady, and the titillation he must suffer on her account. As he recalled the peculiar scent, he tried to eliminate one muslim friend after another, but the exercise remained a mystery, and he unfaithful in his heart.'

(Das 1990:22-23)
It seems that the stage is set for a fairy-tale romance and the aura is created by keeping the woman elusive and anonymous. Of course, this excessive romanticism is sought to be balanced by presenting the dissenting voice of Anees herself in a later part of the novel, when she says:

'I have always worn a burkha on the streets. I was brought up to believe that it was the only way. But I don't like it...I don't want to be an observer, I want to be a part of the world.'

(Das 1990:69)

But there are very few women in the novels who abide by the stance of Anees. A satiric version of this romanticism is found in the perforated sheet of *Midnight’s Children*, in which the purdah is not the burkha, but a chaddar, a sheet with a 10-inch hole in it, through which Aadam Aziz explores and discovers the body of the ‘partitioned woman’ Naseem Ghani. It is interesting to note that purdah, too, is presented from the male perspective: the women in purdah become invisible even to the reader – whether it is Jameela Begum Singer, who disappears both from public as well as private view, and only her song exists as a disembodied voice; or the women in Rasheed’s village in *A Suitable Boy* who never step out of the zenana, and thus remain totally invisible.

However, there are men like Aadam Aziz in *Midnight’s Children* and Maharaja Jai Singh in *Raj*, who either out of reformist zeal or by dint
of circumstances want their women to step out of purdah and the zenana. What is surprising is that the women themselves who resent this and for whom the coming out of purdah is a traumatic experience. Naseem’s reaction to this situation is, no doubt, violent, but also typical:

‘What else?’ she says in muffled tones ... ‘You want me to walk naked in front of strange men?’

(Rushdie 1980:33)

Raj explores this trauma with much more intensity. During the famine that strikes Balmer, Maharajah Jai Singh seeks the assistance of his wife and asks her to break purdah for the sake of the suffering people; she is petrified:

A paralysis held her motionless as she waited for the moment to pass and her husband to withdraw those few words which would destroy a thousand years of tradition.

(Mehta 1993:31)

For her, purdah is an important aspect of the tradition to which she belongs and of which she is a custodian. It is not a social construct for her, but an institution ordained by nature itself, and she empathises with her predecessors, who ‘would have killed themselves rather than endure such dishonour’ (ibidem:33). When she is asked to abjure purdah, she is full of foreboding:
... she was convinced that the new child she carried in her body would have a troubled life, robbed of the protection of those time-honoured ways as immutable as the laws of nature.

(ibedum:32)

Purdah also 'places' her firmly as a woman; it gives her an identity, without which she would find herself nowhere:

'He wants me to break purdah. If I obey, I will become like the zenana eunuchs – neither a woman within the protection of women, nor a man in the world of men.'

(ibedum:33)

So, the act of unveiling her face becomes a humiliating public spectacle, which embarrasses the subjects, arouses unhealthy curiosity in the Council of Ministers, causes great pain to Maharajah Jai Singh himself, and is viewed by the Maharani herself 'as final an act of immodesty as unclothing her body' (Mehta 1993:34). Even when Jaya has to come out of purdah, she feels extremely uncomfortable, even though she does it only to meet the requirements of the family and the state – when she has to meet dignitaries, when she has to play polo, when she has to play hostess to British officials and when she travels abroad. And all the while, both Jaya and her mother long to go back into the protectiveness of the purdah.

For them, as for Zainab in A Suitable Boy, purdah protects, and even becomes a source of empowerment: when the property of the Nawab of Baitar is nearly confiscated, it is Zainab, who from behind the purdah
conducts the entire operation to save it. She also succeeds because in a society that views the segregation of women as something honourable, her image is enhanced by her unquestioned acceptance of the culture of the zenana and the purdah. So, instead of feeling restricted by the strategies of segregation and the confinement within the domestic space, and viewing purdah as 'a form of imprisonment, deprivation and denial of opportunities of self-realisation and full development,' as Santosh Gupta puts it (Jain and Amin 1998:12-13), women, in fact, welcome it; maybe, this is the strongest pointer to the internalisation of the patriarchal ideology.

3.4.3. The Education of Women

Discussing the various forms of invisible purdah that women are veiled in, Vrinda Nabar comments:

The denial of learning to women [can] also be seen as a kind of purdah... absence of education, by keeping the oppressed ignorant and easy to exploit [make] the various practices of social segregation less easy to challenge.

(Nabar 1999:130)

The joint family patriarchal ethos, which seeks to separate the public from the private spheres of action, naturally, views the education and employment of women with suspicion. In the upper classes and in so-
called ‘progressive’ families, some kind of education of women is encouraged, but its main purpose is to qualify them to perform familial tasks. Even state-sponsored education systems keep this role of women’s education in mind and the underlying assumptions are that the education of women should not seek to alter their traditional roles, that the natural domain for women is the domestic and not the economic one, and that a woman’s marriage and home are more important than her career (Ramu 1989). Relating the separation of the domestic from the public sphere for women to the nationalist ideology, Chatterjee states that this dichotomy was legitimised by nationalism, since

The home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of national culture, and women must take the main responsibility of protecting and nurturing this quality.

(Sangari and Vaid 1989:243)

Most of the women in the novels – Amina, Tara, Savita, Priya Duryodhani, Jaya, Mrs, and Shrivastava - are well-educated, in keeping with their upper class background. But the kind of education they receive is not designed to liberate them but to strengthen their traditional perceptions. For example, in Midnight’s Children, Naseem takes a monumental vow of silence because she is dead set against the western education her children receive; she wants, especially, her daughters to be
given only an Islamic education. Savita, Tara and Lata get the benefits of
a college education because they belong to 'progressive' families, which,
in effect, implies that their education is merely a stop-gap arrangement to
keep them occupied till a suitable match can be arranged for them. And,
of course, their education raises their value in the marriage market. Thus,
Bauji in *A Fine Family*:

He had regarded the education of his daughters as a respectable
and leisurely way to kill time before they got married. That
education also increased their prospects in the marriage market
was not lost on him

(Das 1990:47)

It is in this context that the education of Jaya in *Raj* acquires
significance. Jaya is highly resilient and her accomplishments prepare her
well for the various roles that she will need to take on, later on in her life.
In her parental home she is educated both in the domestic arts as well as
the political sphere. It is her mother, the Maharani of Balmer, who
indoctrinates her mind with the 'sati-culture', which stresses the need for a
woman to subordinate herself to the demands made by family, patriarchy
and society. She is also trained in music, aesthetics and house-
management since her mother insists that 'Jaya be educated in the
traditional manner of the princesses of Balmer' (Mehta 1993:43); that she
be 'raised in the ways of her predecessors, which alone could protect the
child from the harsh, changing world beyond the zenana wall’ (Mehta 1993:42). In addition, her father, Maharajah Jai Singh, who does not want her to be raised in purdah, takes her along on hunting expeditions and exposes her to the Western education that her brother Tikka receives; further, the Rajguru is also instructed to tutor her in statecraft — rajniti — which stands her in good stead in her roles as Maharani of Sirpur and later on as its Regent. But even this all-round, comprehensive education is inadequate in her marital home, since her husband expects her to be westernised enough to become the perfect hostess to his English guests. All the training she has received at Balmer is devalued and she has to be re-groomed by the socialite Mrs. Moody.

Jaya is also among the few women who step out into political life, and at the end of the novel she does emerge as an individual when she moves out of the traditional roles that her father, mother, husband and son have demarcated for her, at progressive stages in her life. The other educated women in the novels can hardly think of taking up employment, except in cases like those of Mrs. Shrivastava, the Collector’s wife in English August, who has completed her education and who gets her job as a college lecturer on the strength of her husband’s position. Lata, in A Suitable Boy, does harbour hopes of becoming a lecturer — again, a ‘safe’ profession for women — but there are no signs that she will actually pursue
a vocation after her marriage to Haresh. Tara, in *A Fine Family*, does become a teacher in a school at Lyallpur, before her marriage, but for this she has to meet familial and social disapproval:

‘Tara is going to work, Tara is going to work’, the whole town had whispered. Even Bauji, who was more progressive than the others had found this hard to stomach.

(Das 1990:47)

Her mother’s protests are, expectedly, vehement and typical. “Can’t we feed her?” My friends keep asking, “Why does she have to work?” (Das 1990:47-48).

The educated woman is disapproved of, because she is seen as a threat to the family unity, since employment would make her economically independent and as Gore points out the economically independent woman does not fit in well into the joint family as a system (Gore 1953). She is seen as an aberration in society since, by her very presence she challenges the norms of patriarchy.

The harshness with which the working woman is depicted is evident in the case of the grandmother in *The Shadow Lines* and Begum Abida Khan in *A Suitable Boy* – and this harshness and negative portrayal underlines the fact that both of them are highly individualised, fiercely independent, fiery and stubborn single women, qualities that do not allow
her to remain ‘a fringe or peripheral member of her descent group’ (Dube 1997:35).

3.4.4. The Woman Patriarchs

One of the important insights of feminist criticism according to Sydney Janet Kaplan is that ‘a [female] author’s own absorption of patriarchal values might cause her to create female characters who fulfil society’s stereotypes of women’ (Greene and Kahn 1994:38). This is evident in a novel like Raj, which celebrates the values of princely India before independence and is almost a paean to a world, which has disappeared in the face of the forces of democratisation. It is unabashedly nostalgic about the values of heroism, courage, masculinity, which its men project, and faithfulness, conservatism and traditionalism, which the women stand for. Even though a mild form of questioning does arise in the mind of the protagonist, Jaya, neither she nor the novelist offer a critique of this system. Similarly, in the other novels, authored by men, the depiction of women reveals a strong patriarchal gaze, which valorises women who conform to the status quo (or completely ignores them as in Days of the Turban) and is contemptuous of women who stand out as ‘different’, for whatever reason.
Therefore, damning as the near-decimation of women characters is in the novels, the portrayal of supposedly ‘strong’ women is even more problematic. The Grandmother in The Shadow Lines, Naseen Ghani and Amina Sinai in Midnight’s Children, Jaya in Raj, Rupa Mehra in A Suitable Boy, and Priya Duryodhani in The Great Indian Novel are the matriarchs, who have taken on the roles and functions of the patriarchal authority. It would, perhaps be more appropriate to call them women-patriarchs since they uphold the patriarchal ideology and become the chief instrument in transmitting it since they have internalised it to form part of their own consciousness. The strongest among these appears to be the grandmother and the most ruthless is Priya Duryodhani.

The grandmother in The Shadow Lines rules over her household with the same iron grip, which she uses to run her school, first as a teacher and then as headmistress. Her primary concern is to discipline, be it her students or her family members. Her daughter-in-law, the narrator’s mother is so completely under her control that she is barely permitted to indulge in small luxuries like listening to the radio. Her grip over her son, and later on her grandson is equally tenacious. She deeply resents people like Tridib and Ila, who refuse to fall in line with her ways. She loosens her grip, to some extent, when she retires from school, but the letting go of authority is extremely painful for her. Further, her strong-willed
stubbornness persists, leading to the disastrous journey to Dhaka. Jaya and her mother in *Raj*, hold power by proxy – on behalf of the male members of the family – and largely in their absence, when the father/brother/husband/son are away or dead. It is significant that Jaya as Regent has more powers than Jaya as queen; for as queen, she is merely a consort of the king, almost a mere appendage, but as regent she can actually exercise power on behalf of her son.

Rupa Mehra in *A Suitable Boy*, does not wield much authority, - her role is limited to finding suitable matches for all her children, especially daughters, and even this is to be done under male supervision. Priya Duryodhani in *The Great Indian Novel*, has achieved her position, initially, due to the male perspective that being a woman, she would be more malleable and amenable to functioning as a mere figurehead and game for manipulation by power brokers. But she snatches the opportunity presented to her and soon consolidates her position by her wiliness and ruthlessness. In *Midnight's Children*, Amina Sinai takes up the family responsibility only when her husband faces a severe financial crisis when all his assets are frozen by the government. But her control over her family remains hidden, unstated and unclaimed. She is satisfied by winning over her husband either through gentle persuasion or
seduction, and never does she allow Ahmed Sinai to feel threatened in his position of patriarch of the family.

The patriarchal base in the novels is reinforced by the fact that the women who are in social or political positions of power misuse their authority and exert it in a high-handed manner, often to disastrous effect. Power in the hands of women like Priya Duryodhani, the Grandmother and Begum Abida Khan, - women who enjoy the sense of power - is perceived as destructive and disruptive.

Priya Duryodhani and Abida, both women who exercise political power, appear to have trespassed into forbidden territory and are objects of suspicion both among men and women. Abida is called a ‘vixen’ right on the contents page itself. Her political opponent, L N Aggarwal refers to her as ‘the virulent Abida Begum’ and ‘this shameless, exhibitionistic woman, who smoked in private and screeched in public, who had not even followed her husband when he had left for Pakistan but has immodestly and shamelessly remained in Purva Pradesh to make trouble’ (Seth 1993:259). [Italics added to prove a point.] This opinion is echoed even by the brother-in-law, the more sophisticated and rational Nawab of Baitar; according to him she is a woman of whose ‘immodesty and forwardness’ he disapproves. She also has to face the censure for her lifestyle from the women of the zenana. The chief reasons for this complete
censure across gender lines is that she is single, that she does not observe purdah, that she lives alone, and most irksome of all, that she has ventured out of the private domestic space of the household and dared to aspire to be part of the public sphere. One vainly looks for traces of authorial irony in her portrayal; on the other hand her efficacy comes under serious doubt when all her rhetoric on the floor of the house does not save the threatened property of the Nawab, while the behind-the-scenes (literally, too) machinations of the more conventional Zainab, the Nawab’s daughter are able to protect the ancestral property. Zainab’s power comes from her ability to see elegance, subtlety, etiquette and family culture in the conventional world of the zenana, and which inspires respect, sympathy and loyalty among the conventional men she has to deal with.

The Grandmother in The Shadow Lines is treated as harshly as Abida, by Ghosh. She follows a more conventional and ‘acceptable’ profession than Abida and Duryodhani, and she has ventured into the professional world out of sheer financial necessity after the death of her husband. Almost single-handedly, she has brought up her only son – no mean achievement for a woman in the 1930s. But instead of winning accolades for this feat, she is actually made out to be cantankerous and insensitive. She constantly complains that no relative of hers had come forward to assist her at the time of her need, and she justifies her own
insensitivity to the poverty of her younger relatives in Calcutta. Her role as the financial support of her family makes her a strict disciplinarian and nurtures her authoritarian tendencies; it is she who defines the role of each and every member of the family:

She had been careful to rid our little flat of everything that might encourage us to let our time stink. No chessboard nor any pack of cards ever came through our door; there was a battered Ludo set somewhere but I was only allowed to play with it when I was ill. She didn't even approve of my mother listening to the radio play more than once a week. In our flat all of us worked hard at whatever we did; my grandmother at her school-mistressing; I at my homework; my mother at her housekeeping; my father at his job as a junior executive...

(Ghosh 1997:4)

The life-style she imposes on the family members is as narrow and constricted as the flat they live in, and the grandmother emerges as the centralised authority who runs all their lives according to her own pre-conceived notions. Nowhere does the author try to go into the causes of her rigidity; nor is there any attempt to explore the travails faced by a workingwoman in the 1930s – a time when the entry of women into public professions was severely restricted. The idea seems to be – give a woman power and she is bound to misuse it.

When the treatment of the Grandmother is not harsh, it is comical; either she is censured or trivialised. So, her actions on and after her retirement are subject to ridicule. At the school farewell party she behaves
most clumsily, and at home she begins to interfere in the household domain of her daughter-in-law. (Incidentally, she is also portrayed as a bad cook, reinforcing the stereotype that employed women cannot manage a home properly.) She finds time hanging heavy on her hands and she takes to trivial pursuits like taking treatment for her imagined fear of going bald; worse still, she finds it extremely difficult to let go of her school, and she keeps on visiting it at the slightest pretext:

After a dozen or more of these visits the new headmistress rang my father at his office and told him that if he could not think of ways of keeping his mother away from the school she would instruct the chowkidar not let her in the next time she came.

(Ghosh 1997:118)

Tragedy overtakes her, largely because she is a woman who uses her mind independently; - misuses it in ill- advised ventures like writing to the dean of the narrator's college at Delhi, seeking his suspension on the grounds of his allegedly immoral behaviour, - for which, though, she has no conclusive proof. The blame for Tridib's death, too, is laid at her doorstep, it was her plan to rescue Jethomoshai which takes them to Dhaka, with the tragic consequences following. Her guilt and remorse, at the end, are the price she has to pay for her assertiveness and her independence.
The women patriarchs who work within the frameworks permitted by patriarchy, on the other hand, have been presented as responsible members of the family and society. The ‘ideal’ for women is presented as a silent, self-effacing acceptance of the roles allotted to her, the roles of the ardhangini, of the sowbhagyayati, of a woman among other women in a large family, of a mother and finally a widow.

(Nabar 1995:44)

Thus, the efforts of Jaya in Raj and Amina Sinai in Midnight’s Children are viewed as valiant attempts to preserve and nurture the family, and by implication, society, as a contrast to the power-conscious, perhaps, even the empowered Grandmother, Abida Khan and Priya Duryodhani; the condemnation they are subject to is ironical, though, because even they, liberated as they may seem to be use their power in order to strengthen ‘a framework of values which seeks to preserve the conservative world view at all costs’ (Nabar 1995:45). The role of the women patriarch also proves the point made by Chatterjee that ‘It is impossible that... women [have] played a wholly passive part [in their own oppression], for even the most severe system of domination seeks the consent of the subordinate as an autonomous being’ (Sangari and Vaid 1989:250).
3.5. The Summing Up

This analysis of family and gender concerns in the novels of the 1980s is more or less a bird’s eye view of the situation, and the generalisations that may have emerged need to be corrected keeping in mind what M N Srinivas (1989) refers to as the bewildering complexity of social systems in India. The joint family itself cannot be straitjacketed into an unchanging monolithic structure, just as women, too, would not form a completely homogenous group. The novels of the 1980s have portrayed the joint family with all the variations that it has absorbed. Thus, for example, they speak of the ethos of the joint family, which may not necessarily be a joint household. Further, the lines along which the generations are developed reveal an interesting fact: though heavily patriarchal, the growth of families is presented along ‘matrilineal’ lines, to adopt a phrase from sociology, not in the sense that the succession is along matriarchal lines, but often, as in the case of Tara in A Fine Family, it is the daughter’s family that is the focus of attention. The same is true in novels like Midnight’s Children, The Great Indian Novel, The Shadow Lines and Raj, which follow the fortunes of the central women of the family. In a rigidly patriarchal depiction it would be Bauji’s son, the paternal wing of the family, and not Mayadebi’s family, Aadam Aziz’s
sons rather than Amina and Ahmed Sinai who would be central to the plots of their respective novels.

Further, the family, integral as it is to the structure of Indian society, forms just one link in the vast network of castes, communities and classes that go into the making of it. Much of its structure and composition depends on the factors, and in order to get a fuller understanding of family ideologies and patterns it is vital to place it in the context of the larger social groups within which it functions. In many ways, the family becomes a prototype for these larger structures, which takes on the conventionality, traditional mores, culture, patriarchy, and the subordination of individual as well as women, as the foundation of larger social structures. In the previous chapter, the impact of classes has been explored. The next two chapters will look at the communities and castes that make up the social fabric of Indian society and at how these aspects of caste and community are depicted in the novels of the 1980s. Because, ultimately, it is the interweaving of family, class, caste, community, which go into the making of the nation and in determining its hegemonic structures and ideology.