Chapter Three
Disenchantment and Disengagement

It [marriage] is like a cage; one sees the birds outside desperate to get in, and those inside equally desperate to get out.

(Montaigne 263)

As one watches the blooming of premarital or marital intimacy and its being blighted in the fictional world of Ambai and Alice Munro, one tends to wonder if the institution of marriage has any relevance in the traditional sense of the word. The couples here find love or passion lighting up their gloomy and lonely existence only for a brief period. The fleeting nature of conjugal relationships obliges one to ask if the same women could play the three roles in wedlock which Bacon refers to thus, "Wives are young men's mistresses; companions for middle age; and old men's nurses" (18). Most women experience what Shelley calls "love's sad satiety" (80). The wings of the caged birds break and they pine away like Chaya with the pearls of their mind turning into stones (Ambai, Cirakukal 134), or "smashing up" their "marriages," they go out "looking for adventure," as Hilda and Georgia do in "Differently" (Munro, Friend 222).

Talking about her unconventional match made with Mathur on her own terms, Ambai says, "I think there should be a system where one could like a person a lot, be his
companion, give each other a lot, but you don't have to be under the same roof or do the same things" (Ambai, Dickman interview 10). Her female protagonist in "Cañcāri" of the first collection asks:

How difficult it is for two loving hearts to live together under the same roof! The tedium of their union would drive one crazy. Isn't being together thus either inside or outside marriage nothing but an arrangement for each other's sexual satisfaction? (Cirakukal 70-71)

The major thematic strains of the Canadian writer and the Tamil writer range from mild protest and disillusionment to strong resentment and renunciation of wedlock in the conventionally conceptualized sense of it. The main focus in both the writers is on the crisis of man-woman relationship within or without the orbit of marriage. Their different perceptions of men are conditioned by their different cultural backgrounds. Most Munrovian women find their men fickle and faithless, and walk out on them hoping to be happier with new lovers while the majority of the Ambaian women silently pronounce their men insensitive and inhuman, and put up with their lot in life or renounce wedlock or life itself. Unlike most of Munro's women, Ambai's anguished heroines do not generally act on the song which Fame says her mother and grandmother used to sing in their younger days:
"I once had a sweetheart, but now I have none.
He's gone and he's left me to weep and to moan.
He's gone and he's left me, but contented I'll be,
For I'll get another one, better than he!"

(Munro, *Progress 8*)

However, Ambai's denunciations of male chauvinism are rather overt and louder as the fierce feminist in the Indian writer feels more suffocated in a cultural system that seeks to repress her aspirations and reduce her space more in favour of her male counterpart. The reasons why female-male relationships disintegrate and the disengagement which their women seek on the physical or emotional level are discerned and discussed by the perceptive protagonists of the two authors. The fictional feminists feel here that disenchantment and disengagement are the common denominators of female experience in a phallocentric social system that suppresses the voice of the woman and makes her submissive to male authority. The women portrayed here are true to life in their desires and disappointments, their impulses and emotional as well as physical needs. They yearn for male society even when they are "constantly aware of how their lives can be derailed by men--sometimes how they let them be derailed" (Turbide 48). The Munrovian women, living in a permissive society, openly opt for fresh friendships as old ones fail them. As their partners' passions cool and ennui
sets in, they mar their match or manage to stray into the illicit territory and seek relief from the terrain of sex. Their counterparts in the Indian context covertly carry on or crave for fresh sexual relationships which quite often remain un consummated.

In "Vallūṟukal" of Ambai's first book, Ram Sharma's wife gets totally tired of her callously greedy man and severs her sexual ties with the tyrannical man; yet she does not seem to have been overtly carrying on with the secret visitor, Gopal Babu. A memorable occasion recalled by the narrator is the merry chat of her mother as this man looked in. The narrator hid herself and eavesdropped on their conversation which she could not remember now as she was too young to make out their words. She only recollects the sudden return of her father and the abrupt departure of the man. The father fetched from the worship room the pot of Ganga water and asked the mother to prove her purity with a touch of it. The mother's furious reaction to the humiliation is recounted. Yet the mother bore all the blows without resistance and even allowed herself to be taken to his room obviously for molestation. One reads here, "Mother stood there without resisting the blows. Again she was twice slapped on the face and then she was literally carried to his room" (Ambai, Cirakukal, 85).
Sexual boycott was the punishment she meted out to him from within the four walls of the house. Her disengagement remains emotional and does not result in her physical separation from him until her death at the hands of his henchmen. On the other hand, in "Material" of *Something*, the Munrovian couple, Hugo and his wife, get emotionally and physically disengaged when satiety sets in. Hugo leaves Mary Frances when he feels the need for a new marital life with a student of his. The narrator also remarries but sadly realizes how much her new man, Gabriel, has in common with Hugo:

> looking at my husband Gabriel, I decided that he and Hugo are not really so unalike. Both of them have managed something. Both of them have decided what to do about everything they run across in this world, what attitude to take, how to ignore or use things. (Munro, *Something* 36)

Living in a less regimented social setting, Munro could extend to her rebellious heroines greater leeway and leverage where man-woman relationship is concerned. Her protagonists, like Del and Rose, could dare to depart from the sexual mores or monogamous tradition of their religion or region.

A woman reared in the restrictive regions of a country like India gets her due share of space only in her realm of fantasy. Ambai's portraits of women in
most situations are done, therefore, against a painfully constricted patriarchy bounded by the tradition that holds marriage to be a holy sacrament and the husband to be an object of reverence "even if the male spouse happens to be a piece of stone or a blade of grass," as the Tamil saying has it. Ambai strives to show how some of her women have not really had their "umbilical cord with tradition" cut off, to use one of Ambai's own favourite phrases (Face 169).

Her rustic protagonists, like the woman in "Veḷippāṭu" ("Revelation"), are not aware of the fact that customs and conventions have robbed them of their rights. Most of their urbanized counterparts feign to be free but in reality resemble the characters in Tom Morton's play, Speed the Plough, who live in fear of "What will Mrs. Grundy say?" (qtd. in Webster's New World Dictionary). Only a few are shown to have the courage to come out of the oppressor-victim ambit. Chenthamarai's mother, Thirumagal in "Piracurikkappatāta Kaippirati" ("Unpublished Manuscript") is one of the very few heterodox housewives portrayed in the Indian context who completes her emotional disengagement with physical separation.

One reads in "The Jack Randa Hotel," "I have my doubts about the lovebirds. Reading between the lines, I can't help wondering if disillusionment isn't setting in . . ." (Munro, Open 165). What Gail here imagines
Cleata would not say to her about the lovebirds' functions as a kind of objective correlative of the disenchantment which is the general outcome of male-female intimacy. Familiarity is found to breed contempt not only in sexual friendships outside wedlock but inside connubial coitus as well. Subtle insights into men's "fiendish," "fickle" and "babyish" dispositions are provided by Munro. The Canadian writer suggests how girls and women are taken in as they give sex to get love. In "Postcard" of Dance, Helen Louise had her puppy-love with a man who "talked about how he had lived with death staring him in the face" and experienced loneliness. She recalls, "He said he wanted to put his head down in my lap and weep, but all the time what he was doing was something else" (134). He just disappeared one day leaving her dazed with daydreams. When she gets terribly jilted next by Clère MacQuarrie, her best friend, Alma, an utterly disenchanted and disengaged woman, says, "Men are always out for what they can get" (138). She adds, "Worse things could happen. I had four years of living hell" (139). The ditched Helen remembers Clare's babyish act the previous Saturday night of pulling her hair across his face in the nude and threatening to "bite it off" (138). Alma's fiendish man, Don Stonehouse, threatens to show up and rape her and leave her "a mass of purple bruises . . . from head to
foot" (141). The strange disappearance of her second husband makes Mrs. Fullerton in "The Shining Houses" tell her neighbour, Mary, that she could never figure him out, "What's in a man's mind even when you're living with him you will never know." The loss of male credibility prompts her to put a higher premium on her house than on her husband, "husbands may come and go, but a place you've lived fifty years is something else" (Dance 21). Mr. Malley in "The Office" of the same collection maligns the writer-narrator when she seeks solitude and sufficient space for the flowering of her literary talent outside her house. This figure of male chauvinism is made out to be childish, as Redekop remarks, "he begins to seem, however, more like a big fat baby who is 'eatin' into' her time. . . . He seems to her 'so wistful, so infantile' and she cannot turn away from his 'obsequious hunger'" (Mothers 49).

The dominant thematic strain in the stories of Munro's third collection is the fragility of conjugality. The charm of Char's marriage with Arthur in the title story here, "Something," vanishes like the charm of the Mock Hill Hotel. As a girl, Char tried to commit suicide on account of her unrequited love for Blaikie. Her sister, Et, one day discovers a bottle of rat poison in Char's kitchen cupboard. Et suspects that Char means to do away with Arthur as the wife of "the son of the millionaire" does in Blaikie's story
recounted during his lakeshore bus tour (Something 2). One wonders if Et has been trying to usurp her sister's place in Arthur's life. The lack of communication between Arthur and Char is indicated by their separate beds, "Their parents were both dead by that time ... but it looked to Et like sheets for two beds" (13). Char could only have her husband's appearance altered and not his apathy in wedlock, "Char made him give up the gown altogether, after they were married." Arthur knew that he "looked like a fool" in her eyes. "Char didn't deny it, though his eyes on her, his wide smile, were begging her to" (13). Char's unhappiness might stem from his lack of sexual intimacy with her. One tends to ask if she suspects that Et enjoys it at her expense. Perhaps it is sexual jealousy that leads her to find fulfilment through her passionate affairs with Blaikie. One learns, "Char had a miscarriage during the first year of her marriage and was sick for a long time afterwards. She was never pregnant again" (13). "Arthur suffered a series of dizzy spells" and "the doctor put him to bed. Several things were the matter with him" (2). Blaikie's return years after her marriage widened the gap between Char and Arthur. Arthur admires the lovely looks of his wife but, for all his knowledge of history, he fails to see what happens in his house, "He knew about history but not about what went on, in front of his eyes, in his house,
anywhere" (11). Blaikie and Char remind Et of "Romeo and Juliet" but then "Blaikie of course did not do away with himself afterwards . . ." (18). Blaikie is a man who "knows how to fascinate the women" (1). Thus, the marriage in the title story is seen to be a mismatch with Arthur turning out to be a misfit and Blaikie being delineated as a Don Juan.

The title story of Ambai's first collection also portrays the plight of an unhappy wife whose man fails to fulfil her longings for companionship. Here also one notices how the novelty of nuptials wears off leaving the couple cold and quarrelsome. The disenchanted woman, Chaya, could only suffer and be silent. The marriage of Chaya and Bhaskaran in "Cirakukal" is beneath the surface "a living hell" or "a cosmic disaster," as the Munrovian women put it (Moons 151). The dominant theme here is the apathy of the male spouse and the disillusionment of the woman. The reader is told, "Her name in college was `Beauty of the dream world'" (Cirakukal 133). But all her dreams have been shattered and she is now a wreck of her old self. Her repulsively obese and miserly man is memorably drawn as one who is always counting the cost of the things that they really need for happiness in life. Her desperate efforts to reduce her dependence on him for money through her decision to be a paid dressmaker show how she considers it "a folly trying to
change him" and "sees no meaning in fighting back" (115). It is in her most agonizing moments that she formulates in her mind a series of laws to prevent female frustrations and male malevolence. She feels that

1. There should be a law preventing men from "bloating with flesh" and turning into potbellies.

2. Men who have "chests without hair must not marry."

3. Kissing is to be forbidden for those men who chew too many betel leaves and make their teeth look "like a dented tin."

4. The purse of a man needs to be confiscated if he "tightens his purse the moment his wife looks at an object with desire" (91).

5. A Draconian law framed by her says, "Heartless men should be made to have vasectomies to prevent the birth of children to them" (92).

6. Like Munrovian heroines, Ambai's women regard "sex as a wholesome . . . indulgence, like dancing and nice dinners." There is a law stipulating that women who have "not read the Kamasutra must not be permitted to
marry" (Munro, *Moons* 151; Ambai, *Cirakukal* 98).

7. A husband who approaches his wife for
   sex when he is not wanted needs to be
   given a house "in the red-light district
   permanently" (*Cirakukal* 109).

8. "Legal proceedings should be taken
   against Tamil film-makers who portray
   women as ascetics" (118).

9. Chaya is so anguished in the end at
   wedlock's demand of her most cherished
   dreams as a sacrifice that she no longer
   bothers to think of the last law "to
   stop the decay and destruction of all
   things" (134).

Chaya typifies the silently rebellious but really
self-sacrificing wife in an Indian home. As one reads
here, "she got into bed as a bird that had lost its
wings" (136), one instinctively describes her in the
words of Matthew Arnold, which are used to depict the
visionary Shelley, "a beautiful and ineffectual angel,
beating in the void his luminous wings in vain" (147).

Chaya's mother is reported to have been unhappy like
her. So she could sympathize with her daughter's
plight. The dust-covered Veena (lute) with its broken
strings and its lost bridge would testify to the
tyranny of her father. Her mother once used to play it
skilfully. In the cage of marriage her playing Veena was put down by her man. It used to please the ears of an old man in the neighbourhood. The girlish housewife would delight the old man every evening as he reminded her of her own father living away. One day her husband got back when she was in the middle of a song. She got up only after finishing it for the old neighbour. After the man had left, her husband asked her, "Who are you married to?" She said, "Of course, to you." She could not at that tender age make it out. He then said, "Whatever you have is mine alone. Do you understand? You are not to play the Veena for everyone. You can play it for me alone" (132). That very night she broke its strings restraining her love of art. But the broken strings symbolized the disharmony and disenchantment she was to pass through ever after. The situation here reminds one of Kate Millett's thesis that male power is sustained and used through the husband's control over the sexual life of the woman. Discussing it, Pam Morris writes:

This need to retain sexual dominance explains the recurrent misogynistic images of women in literary texts, as whores or virgins, frigid or nymphomaniac, chaste or licentious. Millett suggests that such images function to justify male sexual authority and the
coercion and violence used to sustain it. (15)

Most of the couples in the third book of Munro have very little in common to make them happy or to lessen their disharmony and incompatibility. Rasporich feels that this collection "has a marked tone of female alienation which, since Munro's first volume, has become increasingly more vocal." She thinks that the attitudes of the heroines in stories like "Material" and "The Spanish Lady" "are blatantly threatening and hostile" on account of "unsatisfactory relationships with men" (52). Sex is for the women a means to an end. She looks in this union primarily for companionship. It is for the man, on the other hand, an end in itself. "Spanish" is the unhappy tale of a deserted and deeply sensitive wife who is deceived by her husband, Hugh, and dejected by the betrayal of Margaret, her best friend. The disenchantment of the middle-aged woman is voiced during her journey on a train which is "westbound out of Calgary." It begins with two unfinished letters by the woman to her husband and girlfriend and colleague, Margaret. Sitting in the cubicle of the train, she talks about herself and her ideas. She differentiates between a girlfriend and a mistress, and concludes that "Neither word would hang well on Margaret" (Munro, Something 142). She remembers how at the party thrown by them to entertain
the young teachers, "Hugh's real pleasure came from Margaret, when everybody had gone" (144). Hugh, one learns, frustrates his passionate wife and fails to "involve" her "in a volcanic affair" (147) exactly like Arthur in "Something" or Bhaskaran in "Ciřakukal." She finds fulfilment through extramarital affairs. Her trauma could be discerned as she says why she does not have to worry about straying into the illicit territory. She says, "Men have left marks on me which I did not have to worry about hiding from Hugh, since there are parts of my body at which he has never looked" (147). The conspiracy of their cruel amusement makes the woman wish to torment them as they copulate: 

perhaps I go into the bedroom and without a word pick up everything I can find . . . and hurl these things at the bed, the window, the walls; then grab and tear the bed cloths and kick the mattress and scream and slap their faces and beat their bare bodies with the hairbrush. As the wife did in God's Little Acre, a book I read aloud to Hugh. . . .

(145)

The idea that men manage to get out of women what they sexually need gets repeated in story after story. The deserted and distressed fiancee of Chris Watters in another story of Something feels betrayed as the maid of the Peebles admits to being caressed by her man.
The annoyed nurse calls her "loose little bitch." In her denunciation of the maid one could sense her own rage at being abused by men, "He just made use of you and went off, you know that, Don't you? Girls like you are just nothing, they're just public conveniences, just filthy little rags!" (51).

Protagonists like Ambai's Rukma in "Cañcāri" or Alice Munro's Prue in the story named after her are women who expect to get companionship from their men in return for sex, but their men have no "resources of love" to fulfil the aspirations of their women. What Alice Kelling says invariably happens in most man-woman relationships in the stories of the two writers. Rukma's puppy-lover, Rajan, asks her, "Should a man marry all the women he sleeps with?" (Cirakukal 78). Later in life, fed up with her jealous partner's humbug and obsession with sex, she silently asks him in her mind:

Can you bed a woman with all the graces of your mind and body in the mild sun beneath green trees, or under the blue sky, or on the shore lashed by the waves? As you travel on a bus, can you look at the woman before you without treating her as a mere body? (68)

Prue is a divorcee in her late forties. Her marriage turned out to be a disastrous experience for her obviously because of the suffocation she
experienced due to male domination and failure to find fulfilment in her conjugal life. Unlike Rukma, she completed her emotional disengagement with physical separation and chose to move out of the miasma of marriage. She would rather be one of the "non-victims," to quote one of the famous phrases of Margaret Atwood. The point of most of the anecdotes that Prue relates is "that hopes are dashed, dreams ridiculed, things never turn out as expected . . ." (Moons 150). Beneath her cheerfulness one could detect the tragedy of her life. She is so distracted that she cannot even "read her own motives and 'more or less forgets' about the objects she has stolen from various people" (Smythe, Grief 149). The things pilfered "are not sentimental keepsakes. She never looks at them" perhaps because their owners have betrayed her like Gordon, who confides to her unashamedly his love for a younger woman without any compunction (Moons 155).

Disenchantment inevitably follows when the woman "can't connect the real man any more with the person she loves, in her head," as Kay says in "Bardon Bus" (Moons 136). In "Hard-Luck Stories" of the same collection, Julie's marriage to Leslie is said to be on the rocks. She says to her bosom friend (who dared to walk out on her man and risked being alone), "her husband Leslie is cold-hearted, superficial, stubborn, emotionally stingy . . ." and "sometimes she feels her
emotions, her life, her something-or-other—all that is being wasted" (212). Listening to her friend's tale of disillusionment, the narrator thinks, "this sounds like the complaints many women make, and in fact it sounds a lot like the complaints I used to make, when I was married (213). The stories related by the narrator, Julie and Douglas, have to do with the use men make of women. Julie recounts two stories whose major thematic strain is stretched by the tale told by the narrator to drive home the point that women are generally taken for a ride. Martin comments that Douglas "is the unnamed man that she 'was in love with' ... and who treats her so scurvily in her hard-luck story" (152). The story is a record of unhappy man-woman relationships. The narrator believes that there are "two kinds of love" (Moons 211).

There's the intelligent sort of love that makes an intelligent choice. That's the kind you're supposed to get married on. Then there's the kind that's anything but intelligent, that's the one, that's the one, everybody really values. That's the one nobody wants to have missed out on. (226-227)

Julie wonders if she has "missed out on every kind." She could not "tell the different kinds apart" (211).
Francine says:

Among all the components of marriage, intimacy is probably the quality most longed for, and often the most elusive. With that closeness many things become possible. Without it, there is loneliness. . . . (46)

The protagonist Lydia in "Dulse" of the same collection is a lonely, disillusioned and matronly writer who walked out on her man nine years ago and has just passed through the throes of disengagement from Duncan in Kingston. The reader hears that "She didn't feel at all like committing suicide. She couldn't have managed the implements, or aids, she couldn't even have thought which to use" (Moons 48-49). Her lover, Duncan, reminds one of X in "Bardon" in that he has had a succession of sweethearts whose lives he has soured. It is to recover from the experience of being jilted by him that she retreats like Willa Cather at "the end of the summer Lydia took a boat to an island off the southern coast of New Brunswick . . ." (42). There she expects "to get as far away from human involvement as possible" (Martin 134). But her encounter with the three men there--Lawrence, Eugene and Vincent--, revives in her the yearning for male society despite the inevitable outcome of disenchantment and the compulsive need for disengagement. Rasporich points out that she is conscious of being "in middle-aged
transition" (71). As she lies in bed at night with Eugene inviting her amorously in the next room, she thinks of "what those men would have been like, as lovers. It was Lawrence who would have been her reasonable choice" (Munro, Moons 59). She feels she has more in common with Vincent:

With him she could foresee doors opening, to what she knew and had forgotten; rooms and landscapes opening. . . . Or was it just the truth about what she needed and wanted; should she have fallen in love with, and married, a man like Vincent, years ago; should she have concentrated on the part of her that would have been content with such an arrangement, and forgotten about the rest?

That is, should she have stayed in the place where love is managed for you, not gone where you have to invent it, and reinvent it, and never know if these efforts will be enough? (60-61).

In the seventh segment of this story, Munro shows the reader what kind of relationship Lydia had with Duncan; what kind of man he was and the wide "gap between what she wanted and what she could get" (62). The love that Lydia expected to find in Duncan turned out to be a mirage. He was a "witty and personable" man, reading a lot and enjoying intellectual companionship (63). The
insensitive facet of his personality could be seen when
he spoke about his former girlfriends. During a drive
in the countryside he was reminded of one of them named
Lorraine, a woman with a voluptuous figure. Lydia's
instinctive attempt to beautify herself to please him
and his snubbing her are shown. The desire of a woman
who makes gigantic efforts to please her man and her
disillusionment could be sensed when she discovers the
"monsters" in each other

with a lot of heads, in those days. Out of
the mouth of one head could come insult and
accusation, hot and cold out of another false
apologies and slimy pleas, out of another
just such mealy, reasonable, true-and-false
chat as she had practised with the doctor.
Not a mouth would open that had a useful
thing to say, not a mouth would have the
sense to shut up. (65)

Like most Munrovian wives, Lydia says that she spent
all her time trying to understand him but made little
progress. She finds that "there's something in him
that's an absolute holdout" (64). The dialogue between
her and her doctor lays bare her despairing soul.
Finally they broke up.

Earlier in the story, Lydia has a chat with the
woman of the guest-house and says, "I'm on my own now,
too," but Lydia is told, "You can't be on your own
forever. I met John and he was in the same boat" (49). Consequently, women meet and mate looking for love but find in their partners their preference for sex. Their lack of love results in sexual satiety and suffering for their women. The Ambaian heroine, Leelu, in "Miritiyu," remembers Ranga as a man interested only in his physical union with her. He is the kind of spouse condemned by Chaya's seventh law as he wants to have it with her even when she tells him, "Oh, no, Ranga. We can't have it today. I'm not feeling well" (Cirakukal 61).

The main focus in Munro's "Labor Day Dinner" of the fifth collection is again on the crisis of man-woman relationship. The mental weariness that sets in when the novelty of physical intimacy has worn off is strikingly painted here. Martin comments:

It is a portrayal of silent, relentless marital warfare, which had been touched on in "Mischief" and "Connection," but not as fully and convincingly developed as it is here. . . . (146)

The protagonists in "Bardon," "Prue," "Dulse" and "Labor" are all notably vulnerable victims of masculine mistreatment. Blodgett quips:

The story is what it announces itself to be: a long holiday dinner shared by Roberta and her family and Valerie and hers. The central
family is Roberta's, consisting of the man she lives with and her two children, Angela and Eva. It is evident from the outset, however, that they are less a family than four people living together, "costumed," as they are, "in a way that would suggest that they were going to different dinner parties."

(123)

Roberta could not hit it off with Andrew in Halifax and they parted as "everything between them seemed artificial" like the relations between Richard and his wife in "connection" or those between Rose and Patrick that Martin has referred to. Roberta is seen to be in a sad frame of mind as she visits Valerie with George and her two daughters. Her attempts to please George have not been successful. It was when Roberta moved to Toronto and was with Valerie that she struck up an acquaintance with George, Valerie's colleague on the staff of Toronto High School. His wife, a jittery, well-dressed woman had been killed in a Florida plane crash. Valerie thinks that the romance of Roberta and George has been her creation as it budded with inspiration from her. She would say "It was the first time I ever saw love bloom at close quarters" and would add, "It was like watching an amaryllis. Astounding" (Munro, Moons 162). Before Valerie knew of their attachment, she had confided to Roberta on how
idealistic George was and how he would drop "women
rather hard." Roberta listened to this report of her lover

with great interest and a basic disregard, because what other people knew about George already seemed inessential to her. She was full of alarm and delight. Being in love was nothing she had counted on. The most she'd hoped for was a life like Valerie's. (163)

Roberta could not lead a solitary and quiet life as she found the urge to turn to a new lover rather irresistible, as in the case of every typical Munrovian woman. Kareda comments:

In, "Labor Day Dinner," a woman, no longer able to feel young, uncertain whether her love for her husband can endure, "wavers on the edge of caring and not caring. She'd stay on this edge if she could." (63)

Their strained relations are seen clearly during their ride, "shut up together, driving over the hot gravel roads at an almost funeral pace"; one could see them "pinned down by a murderous silence" (Moons 158).

Roberta wears dark glasses to hide the tears that now and then gush unbidden. George knows that "she weeps behind those glasses" (168). George's disenchantment with her comes to the surface outright when he sees her getting dressed and comments, "Your armpits are
flabby." "He is disgusted by her aging body." She tries strenuously to remedy the situation but "Now the remedies bring more problems" (159). Being humiliated, she feels the necessity to leave him and live alone to get relieved of the burden of having to please her partner with sex appeal. Roberta's light-hearted, seventeen-year old elder daughter, Angela, writes in her journal of her mother:

I have seen her change . . . from a person I deeply respected into a person on the verge of being a nervous wreck. If this is love I want no part of it. He wants to enslave her and us all and she walks a tightrope trying to keep him from getting mad. (171)

She has lost her zest for life and has no inclination to "see anybody or do anything." Angela writes on, "This is an intelligent woman who used to believe in freedom" (172).

The fictional historiography of the male mentality recorded by Ambai and Alice Munro reminds one of Simone de Beauvoir's words that the woman is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute―she is the Other. (8)
The woman seeking liberation in the world of the Tamil writer identifies with the essence of life in creatures or objects of nature like the hog in "Oru Kaṟṭukatai" ("A cock-and-bull story") or the waters in "Āṟu." The hog turning up as an interloper and making a man its interlocutor really represents the segment of long-suffering, sexually harassed, physically battered and psychologically bleeding housewives who drudge from dawn to dusk in dark dank kitchens situated in the corners of the male mansions. Here the woman knows the myth of male superiority, for the hog says, "Don't expect me to say that I selected you seeing your brilliant sharp eyes. In fact, I don't see any such light" (Ambai, Viṭṭin 12). The woman symbolically represented here is unromantic, annoyed and anguished. She does not allow herself to be put off by the man until he has heard her out. That the male spouse does not hear the voice of the suppressed woman, who toils to feed him, is clearly brought out as the man says, "I don't hear" and as the hog says, "speaking silently" (12). The woman who tries to make her voice heard is branded "haughty," and the woman setting out to reform the male mentality is dubbed "moralizing." The interlocutor's turning away from the intruding talker indicates his contemptuous attitude towards his wife when their passion has cooled leaving her pregnant. The woman wants to get into the marital enclosure,
although it means surrender for her. The square hole here represents the entrance of the woman into a world of male captivity from a world of danger. In her frantic search for a means of security the woman finds marriage to be the gateway to a life of companionship. Its words, "I feel that what a pig needs is just the space to pass through," sum up the typical aim of the woman born and brought up in the rear part of a rural Indian home like Chidambaram's sister-in-law or the nubile Chandra in "Veḷippāṭu."

The fifty-year old traditional Tamil woman's life in "Veḷippāṭu" is pictorially portrayed through her chat with the journalist. Her object in life is to keep herself as a youthfully attractive object of sex to her man and to perform her household chores from break of day till bedtime. There is in her also the Munrovian woman's fear of aging and rejection. Her wedlock has been throughout a strenuous struggle to please her man who has only contempt for her. How she is rebuked, slapped and treated as an ignoramus is discerned as her husband remarks to the attractive journalist, "Why, Madam, are you talking to her who knows nothing? She can make a good dish of fish" (Vittin 6). The plight of the disenchanted housewife in the obscure hamlet of the land here is all the more pitiable as ignorance breeds in her only endurance of male chauvinism. She is unaware of her need for
disengagement when there is disenchantment. The way a
girl is brought up traditionally with her freedoms
curtailed at every point flashes through the mind of
the journalist.

There is effective juxtaposition of the liberated
urban journalist and her oppressed and orthodox
interviewees who live repressing their desires and
turning themselves into edible objects for the delight
of their menfolk. The housewife slaving for her man in
this story got married at the age of fourteen. Her
groom was her uncle's son aged twenty. What room there
was for romance in a rural ambience of a regimented
social and familial system could better be imagined
than described. Since then, cooking has been her sole
concern in life. Procreation could have been her only
recreation. Two daughters and a son were born to her.
They are now married and have children making her a
grandmother. The feminist journalist wonders if the
story of her life consists in four lines of marriage,
cooking, bearing children and seeing them married. How
her husband expects her to serve his food hot from the
oven and how he flares up and hits her when she fails
to gratify his desire is delineated. The housewife
asks her interviewer what there is to be written on
woman because the woman has been conditioned to think
of her life as a mechanical existence with little
meaning beyond serving her man.
The Ambai-like journalist's write-up is to be on how women live, what kind of work they do and what their attitude towards their life is. The typical housewife's reply is, "What do we think of it? We just bear children. We just cook" (Vittin 5). When the interviewer insists on knowing what her thoughts are during her intervening spells of leisure, the woman is being dismissive. After a slight pause, she recalls seeing a picture of the sea in a book during her girlhood. The sea greatly fascinated her. She could get a view of it only once during a festival at Thiruchendur Temple. Her obsession with the sea became so acute that she got delirious with raving, "Sea, Sea." Her husband is a devout adorer of Lord Muruga but he fails to understand the aspirations of his devoted wife. Even her desire to have a view of the sea is suppressed with a thrash from him. How eagerly he offers to take the journalist to Thiruchendur on her next visit needs to be noted. He is only too happy to have this outing to please the woman that he casually gets acquainted with. He will do for the young stranger what he has not done for his lifelong companion.

The kind of life that every woman, lettered or unlettered, needs and longs for is symbolized by the freely moving sea with its waves that represents free expression of female feelings. It is from her brother
that Chandra learns of how women in Delhi drink tea, and walk fast and travel unescorted. Here she is not allowed to cross the threshold of her house. She is conditioned to believe by her traditional upbringing that she could go out only when she gets married. Cooking, washing, feeding the cattle, and slaving for the male part of the family is her lot in life before and after marriage. If she gets time, she reads the kind of stories that serve to perpetuate her inferiority complex and make her conscious of her vulnerability. The husband of her conception is one who neither gets angry nor uses violence on her. He should take care of her. She dreams of him as an educated and employed man. Her little desires—to go out every day, eat at restaurants, do her shopping by herself, go to the movies and see many places—are beautifully revealed. As they are taught to be subservient and submissive to their prospective spouses, they allow their wings to be clipped when they are inside the marital cages and their little dreams are shattered.

The effect of the revelations in this story are really cathartic for a reader in a similar situation. The plight of nubile girls who get cannibalized by their male partners reminds one of the primitive eskimo girl and her metis man that Mary Jo in Munro's sixth collection sees on the plane to Tahiti. They are
really an extension of the male chauvinist man and his daunted and downtrodden wife in the rural realm of Ambai's world. Discussing "Eskimo," Rasporich says, "The male has the absolute authority; he is 'the Khan,' 'the ruler of the tribe,' a man of several wives or concubines in the age-old masculine tradition. He controls the 'heart'" (117). In Dr. Streeter's daughter, Rhea, one finds the western feminist counterpart of the feminine Chandra of Ambai's world. She is very critical of her father whom she considers to be the cause of several ills. She says, "He has the mind of a dinosaur." She asks Mary Jo, "Why, Mary Jo? Why do men have to have their opinions? So women can sit around clicking their tongues while men wreck the world?" (Munro Progress 190). Rasporich holds that Dr. Streeter is a version of the ultimate contemporary patriarch, "the Khan" in "Eskimo," who by virtue of "force of personality and financial power" and "not through hereditary right" . . . holds the modern woman, Mary Jo, as concubine. (84) Marriage with such a man is bound to be a disarmingly disenchanted discord. Streeter's wife is an unforgiving, "untidy" and scornful research scholar who gulps down her conjugal despair in her drink. She "likes to spend her time with actors" and intellectuals assuming "herself a wit" (Progress 191). Her
contemptuous attitude to the doctor is seen in her reference to him as "the Great Healer" (191). "Last summer, Dr. Streeter and his wife went to Ireland" as the woman works on an Irish poet; but Mary Jo "does not for a minute suppose that they had a good time" (192). The doctor's nurse blames it on his wife as she looks at the disenchanted wife through the eyes of her lover that the man happens to be. The reader notes that

Their holidays . . . are always expensive, and seem to Mary Jo ritualized and burdensome. His house, too, his social life and family life--it's all like that, she thinks, all prescribed, bleak, and costly. (193)

In her 1982 interview, Munro tells Hancock, "I'm toying now with a bunch of stories about marriages" (97). The stories referred to here may be the ones published in her sixth collection. One is made to see here that Mary Jo is as much an unconsciously silenced and suppressed woman as the teenage Eskimo girl who follows her man like a faithful dog that "licks him all over his face" forgivingly even after it is brutally beaten (204). The very title of Munro's sixth book is ironic as there is seen to be no progress of love in the man-woman relationships portrayed in any of the eleven stories. In the title story, women's resistance to men's oppression is treated on three different
levels of successive generations. Marietta's father was a male chauvinist like Papaji in the title story of Ambai's second collection. His wife attempted suicide as callousness culminated in his infidelity. His legacy of three thousand dollars to Marietta is burnt with contempt over the stove by Marietta with her phlegmatic husband looking on. His lack of warmth is noticed as he coolly breaks the news of Marietta's death to Fame. Fame is a divorcee. She could not get along with Dan Casey. Fame's aunt, Beryl, on the other hand, treats her man as a slave kept just for her sensual gratification. He is portrayed as a malleable man like Meenakshi's spouse, Kishan, in Ambai's "Vīṭṭīṇ." Fame and Meenakshi are shown to be women who recognize and resist male tyranny. Fame's grandfather reminds one of the patriarchal power of Ambai's Papaji.

Kusuma's sobs during their picnic show the suffering of the women whose desires are frustrated. They are made to work even during hours of apparent leisure and recreation. Kusuma is here praised as an ideal daughter-in-law by her parents-in-law. She is a highly educated woman but she lacks the courage to assert her right to be an individual and so is submissive. She accepts her traditional role in the house with resignation. The sight of the free flight of white cranes saddens Kusuma. Her tears as well as the silence of Radha Babhiji signify the undercurrent
of disillusionment in their wedlocks. They do not dare to ask for their spatial share unlike Meenakshi who sees Papaji as a kind of "dinosaur" dominating and "wrecking the world" of women, as Munro's Rhea would put it. This Ambaian story is indeed the history of the lack of progress in the marital love made by four couples of three generational planes comparable to the history of the couples in the Munrovian story. One can visualize the kind of life Badi Jiji and her predecessor lived with Papaji's father. Papaji is possibly a chip of the old block. One is made to see in Gopal Bhai and Satish continuance of the patriarchy. Meenakshi alone succeeds in making her man depart from the tyrannical tradition of their menfolk. Papaji is pictured as one who lives mainly to wine and dine. In the eyes of the men of their mould, womenfolk are nothing more than the delicious dishes they cook for their men. What the slaving wives in the kitchen get out of their marriages are painfully painted. The lack of space and view they experience in the kitchen is symbolic of their emotional suffocation in male-dominated environments.

The women, in their roles as daughters, wives and mothers, wish to experience freedom and be accepted as individuals; but most of these home-makers hesitate to be home-breakers. But all their formal relationships lead to the cooling of their ardour. There is little
pleasure and no passion left to sustain man-woman ties for long. The women of Munro do part from their mates, but they are also too imbued with the need for male partners to be completely happy in their free state. So they remarry hoping that their new relationship will last and satisfy them. Both the authors explore heterosexual and family relationships rather than gay ties. There are few homophiles in either world. These writers see physical intimacy as a genuinely passionate union signifying the fulfilment of woman's real relationship with man. Even the most heinously abused wives or heartlessly abandoned lovers do not give up on heterosexism. Munro demonstrates how her sensitive heroines yearn for male companionship in story after story. The Ambaian woman subscribes to this need for women of every sort, even when her artistic creed or conviction militates against it as in the case of Chenbagam in "Mallukkaṭṭu" ("Wrestling") or Hitha in "Wheelchair." The woman in the latter story hesitates to leave Gauthaman wondering:

In all those empty nights to come, would she yearn for Gauthman's comforting hands upon her breast, the feel of his fingers stroking her nipples, adding pleasure to her slumber? When Gauthaman got his attacks of asthma and muttered her name, who would be at his side?

(Ambai, purple 176)
In the former story one sees how the greater musical talent of Chenbagam is sought to be eclipsed and confined to the domestic circle. "Mallukaṭṭu" shows how Chenbagam turns out to be the maestro's true heir leaving his son, Shanmugam, to play the second fiddle on the musical front. Kadhirvel Pillai tells his son, "Shanmugam, don't think that I made Chenbagam sing in order to punish you . . . . Chenbagam has surpassed you all. Such has been her hard work" (18). Yet she is not allowed to display her skill in public, "Why does she need to run up and down? Let her sing at home to her heart's content. A concert will exhaust her. Let her rest while I go out and perform" (19). The relegation of the woman to the background is glimpsed in the first half of the story. She and her husband are compared to two contending flowers:

His teaching did not cease till his death in the world outside. Shanmugam was known to be his musical heir. Awards, honours and prizes poured in. The days of Chenbagam and her man singing together in the house slowly disappeared. . . . He entered a realm of disciples, flatterers and genuine artists. Chenbagam lived with him. She continued to be with him and offer him his milk from behind him. But behind the scenes they still
functioned like two contending flowers.

(Ambai, "Mallukaṭṭu" 19)

The man tries to take her to the peak of excitement on the physical plane; but she remains suffocated at the psychic level due to his denial of the space for the full flowering of the artist in her.

The eight sections of the Munrovian story, "Lichen," are woven into a multi-dimensional picture that exposes the fiasco in female-male relationships. The story mainly probes the relationship of a separated man who visits his former wife annually on her father's birthday. One sees David bringing along with him his present wife, Catherine, whom he is on the point of ditching in favour of his new girlfriend, Dina. Behind his wife's back, he shows Stella the nude photograph of the younger woman that he is to pick up. David's comparison of Stella to a "troll" brings out the gulf between them. That he is callous to women and that he no longer cares for Catherine are shown by the way he parks the car leaving very little room for Catherine to step out. His tendency to dominate and boss around is seen in the way he wants the thornbushes to be cleared and burned. Stella tells Catherine, "Listen to him, still sounding like a husband" (Munro, Progress 34). David and Stella stayed married for twenty-one years and got disengaged eight years ago. Like Addie Jordan in Lives, Stella tries to turn literary and lead an
intellectual life, which is referred to in the second section. Yet one notices in the third section how desperately she tries to keep back from Ron and Mary the fact of her separation from David. In the fourth segment of the story, one hears David telling Stella, "You know, there's a smell women get. . . . It's when they know you don't want them anymore. Stale." She asks him if it was Catherine that he last summer said was "inclined to be fey" (40). She remembers everything he said about Catherine. David now makes Catherine out to be a crazy ignoramus as the novelty of their life together has worn off. He describes to Stella what kind of girl his latest sweetheart is. The noisy sigh of Stella is her painful and pathetic reaction to David's artificiality of voice and cruelty of heart. "Stella gives a sigh that is noisier and more exasperated than she meant it to be and puts down an apple half-peeled. She goes into the living room and looks out the window" (42). In the fifth section Stella's chat with Catherine helps her see what a pack of lies David had told her about Catherine's habits and beliefs. One notes how much Catherine is worried about David's love for her. She compares it to the waves and says, "He loves me, he loves me not" (44-45). She seems to sense his love for Dina and refers to his dyeing his hair. She says "Love is strange, it does strange things. David is actually a sensitive person--
he's a vulnerable person" (44). She understands how "mean" love makes one. In the sixth section, as David frantically tries to reach Dina on the phone one sees that all he is "interested in is being a big bad boy" trifling with women's affections. He has, according to Stella, little interest either "in love" or "in sex" (49). He is a compulsive flirt who leaves his partner when she gets "stale." The seventh section takes them to the nursing home to see Stella's invalid father. One finds that "In his father-in-law's eyes David would always be somebody learning how to be a man, somebody who might never learn, might never achieve the steadfastness and control . . . ." (51). On their way back, Stella tells David that her father has reached the stage in old age where fantasy is his recreation. She wonders what their fantasy would be about. When asked what hers would be, she answers David asking him, "That you didn't leave? That you didn't want to leave? I bet that's what you think mine would be . . . ." (52). The reader knows how longingly she would look back fantasizing her companionship with him to be lifelong. The reader is taken back to the day twelve or fifteen years ago when Stella was a "charming wife" and a sociable hostess. The reader is shown how even in those days David could not remain faithful to her. His first affair was with Rosemary whose calf he stroked on the occasion of a party behind his wife's back. She
senses all his secrets and now seems to be bloated with them. They embrace in the corridor of the nursing home, but he turns away embarrassed when they are seen by "a young girl" selling juice. He feels ashamed to be seen kissing such a gray-haired woman. She senses his shame and says "Never mind, David. I could be your sister. You could be comforting your sister. Older sister" (54). The final section makes her see the photograph of Dina left behind by David. As she looks at it, "She felt the old cavity opening up in her" (55).

"Fits" in Progress signifies the periodic fits in marriages which are likened to earthquakes or volcanoes. The heroine here is Peg, who divorces her husband and settles at "Gilmore" with her two sons. She marries Robert Kuiper in whose store she has been working. She is a reticent and reserved woman. Rasporich comments, "Robert has married Peg, and by so doing, has put a lid on his passions" (155). One could imagine the kind of life they lead dispensing with the passionate pleasures of wedlock. Lovelessness culminates in murder-suicide in their neighbour's house. The tyranny of the husband, Mr. Weebles, might have led to the terrible event. This episode, their neighbours' speculations on the cause, their reactions, the children's feelings when their parents have fights, a peep into Robert's antecedents along with an account
of his present life are what make up the essential details of the story. Lee's ambivalent attitude towards Robert is suggestive of the Munro women's lack of trust in men and their precarious relations with men. She tells him:

All your friendliness and eagerness--that's really aggression. I'm not the only one who thinks this about you. A lot of people avoid you. They can't stand you. You'd be surprised. You push and paw in that eager pathetic way, but you have a calculating look. That's why I don't care if I hurt you.

(People 127-128)

Another Munrovian story here on the break of marital tie is "The Circle of Prayer." The heroine here is Trudy. Her daughter, Robin, and her estranged husband, Dan, are the other central figures here. The main events described in it give one glimpses of the protagonist's meeting her husband, their honeymoon and their breakup. Dan leaves his wife and lives with a lively widow Genevieve, the young mother of three little children at Richmond Hill. His antecedents also go to prove how capable he is of betraying the woman he loves. He ditches Marlene for Trudy when he sees her dancing provocatively in her drunken state. His insincerity could be seen in the tears he sheds as he parts from Marlene. It is with no qualms that he
abandons Trudy when he meets Genevieve, a serious student of law. Dan is nothing more than "a gigolo" like David in "Lichen." Both the men are fickle and fiendish lovers of a succession of women. They give up their old mates as men abandon "wrecked vehicles, in particular the wrecked car . . . with their preference for new models" (Rasporich 155).

Marriage in India continues to be considered more than a mere man-woman relationship. The sacredness of the male-oriented institution conventionally calls for the woman's sacrifice of her dreams. There is still in India a social stigma attached to divorce. Divorcedes tend to be despised even in familial circles. The prospect of the loneliness and loss of prestige they suffer outside persuades most of the poor victims of mismatches and male antipathy to accept their miserable lot in life with resignation like Chaya. The woman rarely completes her emotional break with physical separation as Bharathi in "Pilāciṭik" does in the wake of her row with Kumarasamy. Unlike Tirumagal, Bharathi marries a Gujarathi after her divorce as remarriage in the States is not so difficult or dampened by society. Familial and societal pressures prevent a woman of her status in India from enjoying the kind of company that the Canadian women like Munro's Prue are free to have. Man-woman intimacy is here compelled to be confined to the domain of marriage. The typical Tamil heroine
lives in a social milieu that denies her not only fulfilment of her aspirations but their expression as well. So her flight from fact to fantasy is a compulsive necessity as free play of fancy fashions a less painful parallel existence for her. Munro's protagonists are able to depart with social or familial impunity from the monogamous tradition of their land or stray into what Munro in "White Dump" of Progress calls "illicit territory" (307).