Chudamani Raghavan

*Women Expecting Change*

“Writing must be for self-expression even if it is taken up only as a hobby. It should not be a contrived self-expression.”

(qtd. C.S. Lakshmi, The Face Behind the Mask 89)
Chudamani Raghavan was born on 10th January, 1934 in Chennai as a third daughter to Sri. Raghavan, the then district collector of Chennai and Kanakavalli. Her younger sister Rukmini Parthasarathy was also a renowned novelist and a short story writer. She was not sent to school but was educated at home with the help of teachers due to her physical challenge. She started her literary career in 1954 with the publication of “Parisu Vimarsanam” a humourous skit that appeared in Dinamani Kadir, a Tamil weekly. She lost her mother in 1955. She died on 13th September 2010. Her affection for the deserted was so great that she had executed a will saying that her property should be donated to the charitable trusts, which was immediately executed after her death. Winner of Ilakkia Chintanai [Short story of the month] award, Tamil Sangam Award and State Government Award, she has 32 books to her credit including novels, plays and short story collections. Though she did not have formal education she wrote both in Tamil and English with the same ease. Her first short story “Kaveri” which bagged Kalaimagal Silver Jubilee Award was published in 1957 and first novel Manathukku Iniyaival [The Beloved Woman] was published in 1960. Her award winning play “Iruvar Kandanar” [Two Persons Witnessed] was frequently performed and the best Tamil short story of the year 1972 “Nangam Ashram” was first published in Kanaiyazi in February 1972. She has been translating her own stories into English since 1962. Though a low profile writer who resisted propaganda, she could make a niche for herself in the Tamil literary world through her portrayal of people around her.

A writer who does not go out much and feels that ‘a writer must take care to see that her work remains genuine and is never contrived’, she writes her stories based on the incidents around her, narrated to her and her own reading. (Tharu 235)

Amudasurabhi, Kalki, Pudiya Paarvai, Kanaiyaali, Sourashtra Mani, Manjari, Sadangai and India Today. She has written more than 600 short stories in 19 collections. Some of her short story collections are Antha Neram [That Time 1969], Ilandha Magudham [The Lost Crown 1973], R. Chudamaniyin Sirukadaigal [R.Chudamani’s Short Stories, 1978], Ulagathinidham Enna Bayam [No Fear with the Society, 1978], Suvarotti [The Poster, 1985], Amma [Mother, 1987], Asthamana Kolangal [Rangoli of Sunset, 1993], Kavalai Meeri [Overcoming the Watch, 1996], R. Chudamani Kadaigal [R. Chudamani’s Stories 2001]. Apart from the above ‘The Tamil writer’s Cooperative Society’ published a collection of her stories in 1978. Her novella Iravuchudar [Night Spark] was translated by Vasantha Surya into English as Yamini in 1996. Apart from the above said works she has also penned a few novels like Neeye En Ulagam [You are my World], Theeyinil Thoodu [Message through Fire], Kannamma En Sagodhari [Kannamma is my Sister], a novella called Senthazlai [Red Leaf] and few dramas like Arunodhayam [Sunrise] and Arumai Magal [My Beloved Daughter]. She has written more short stories when compared to novels. When asked the reason for her interest in short stories she replies,

Short Stories and novels are two different genres of literature. Each one has its own style and characteristics. It is not a must that one who is interested in one should be interested in the other. (qtd. Mangaiyar Thilagam 10)

The themes of Tamil Short Stories were different at different times. Before independence untouchability, plight of the widows, the psychology of children, ill-matched marriage, alcoholic prohibition, superstitions were the themes of short stories. During the independence struggle inevitability of caste extinction, unity of India, labourer’s unity became the themes. In the post independent era there was a lot of change in the themes of stories. Human reaction to the problems of poverty, problem of the labourers, problems in joint families, psychological problems like disappointment, expectations became the themes of the stories. Not confining herself to these alone, Chudamani had a variety of themes like the psychological turmoil of married women, the agony of unemployed youth, the plight of a dependent father, the feelings of a mother whose son is about to get married, the psychology of old women, sisterhood, motherhood, male domination, the agony of a crippled man as the themes of her short stories. She wrote in a sarcastic manner about the problems of working women who due
to economic independence were more bonded to the family instead of liberating themselves. As pointed out by Holmstorm,

Her short stories are often sharp and ironic, often about that peculiar phenomenon of the urban educated lower middle class Tamil woman who is the main bread winner of the family, but whose earning capacity far from empowering her and setting her free ties her even more firmly to the needs of the family. (Holmstrom, 56)

Her stories are humorous and well structured. They are either idea-centered or emotion-centered. Through her stories she puts forth her ideas about the society around her. The titles of her stories suggest the readers the themes. Her style and diction are unique commanding verbal dignity. Her flowery language can be sensed in each and every work of hers. Vasantha Surya the translator of Yamini who has sensed the beauty of her language and has succeeded in bringing the same style in her translation of Yamini, commented:

“The Tamil that Chudamani employs swings easily from the Iyengar colloquialisms to poetic imagery with a classical flavour. Chudamani does not feel compelled to follow linguistic fashions. She prefers to remain faithful to her own creative vision and is not easily tempted away from accuracy by the pleasure of using words. As a result, her use of symbolism is convincing.” (n. pag.)

“Her language is poetic and lyrical catching the subtlest of emotions and dexterity.”(Miller 64) In Yamini she describes the beauty of Yamini in unequivocal terms.

Shining like a crown were thick black curls. A smile spread over face like a string of pearls spilling from an open jewel casket – and the round cheeks dimpled forming hollows to catch that loveliness. (2)

She is also adept at describing the psychology of her characters. As Reetha Gowri observes,

Instead of explaining what her characters are doing, she explains their thought process. She feels that the depiction of the psychology of the characters is of utmost importance. .. She occupies a niche for herself in portraying the subtlest of thoughts of her characters. (90)

In “Nangam Ashram” [The Fourth Ashram] the professor describes his love with his wife in his fifty-eighth year in the following words,
As she stood before me, I had felt that she was a Vision, all pervasive and sacred. Strongly enough, I had fallen in love. I, who until then had been a confirmed bachelor of fifty-eight. It had not been an old man’s romance, but a marriage of equal spirits meeting in understanding. (336)

The poetic description of the Nagalinga flowers in “Counting the Flowers” brings the flowers before eyes of the readers “Clusters of buds, green like raw fruit, were visible on the tips of branches. Blossoms in embryo. Future flowers.” (93) Her observation was so meticulous that even a sweet like Mysorepak cannot escape her attention, “Each piece was a lovely golden brown in colour, granular but quickly melting in the mouth, rich and fragrant with ghee.” (“Sriram’s Mother” 45) She continued to observe clearly and describe the slightest line of pain on human faces. The pain on the face of the snacks vendor for not getting educated, that appeared only for a second was beautifully pictured by her.

At that, like a flash of flame, there was a sudden change on that unchanging face. He shot a look at me and I saw his eyes pervade with a swirling pain, a seething rage. His lips quivered as though on the verge of an outburst. The next moment his face once more became a mask and he stood up. (“The Snacks Vendor” 18)

The picturesque run of a woman to free herself from the tangles that chain her was explained by her poetically as.

As she ran she shed her woman’s body with its shadow of tribulation. She transformed herself with running, driving her feet faster and still faster, till at last barely brushing the ground with the tips of her toes. (“Drought” 36)

Despite her being a women writer, she also has written about the problems faced by men and has also portrayed men as the protagonists in some of her short stories. In “The Strands of the Void” the priest is the protagonist of the story. In “The Snacks Vendor” the unemployed youth is the protagonist. In “My Daughter Shobhana” Shobana’s father is the protagonist. It is surprising to note that she describes with the same ease the psychology of men as she describes the psychology of women. She has produced some men who are considerate and understanding and some men who are arrogant and who try to exploit women. When the temple priest in “The Strands of the Void”, professor Gnanaskandan in “Nangam Ashram”, Shobhana’s father in “My Daughter Shobhana” belong to the first category, Saravanan in “Sisterhood”, Sridhar in
“The Slayer of Narakasura”, Damodaran in “Two Women on an Evening”, Somasundaram in “A Knock at the Door” belong to the second category. Similarly she has portrayed both good and bad women in her stories. She does not portray mere men or women as the victims or the culprits. For her both men and women are victims and the human feelings of greed, jealousy and affection are the real culprits. As Vasantha Surya points out the real culprit in Yamini,

Here the pre-eminent emotion is not love between a man and a woman, but the love of parents for their child. That is the chief motive for action, and the real culprit in this story. (Introduction to Yamini, n. pag)

A close observation of her characters shows her human approach towards life. Thirteen of her stories have been taken up for study. “A Knock at the Door” pictures the human feelings of pain when someone dearer to them gets separated from them. Psychological drought faced by a woman due to lack of love and affection is the theme of the story, “Drought”. The affection between a father and a daughter and the daughter’s concern for the father which makes a traditional father undergo transition and accept modernity is clearly pictured in “My Daughter Shobhana”. The suffocation experienced by a housewife due to over weighing domestic responsibilities is beautifully pictured in “Bunch of Keys”. Dowry problem has been the main issue in “Counting the Flowers”. The four phases that a man undergoes in his life as compared to a women’s life has been discussed in “Nangam Ashram”. Difference in the way widowhood is tackled in India and abroad, the loneliness of a widow at every stage of her life have been clearly portrayed in “Sriram’s Mother”. Gender discrimination and sisterhood are the issues in the story “Two Women on an Evening”. If dowry Problem is the theme of the stories “The Slayer of Narakasura” and “The Strands of the Void”, sisterhood is the theme of the story “Sisterhood”. The psychological deviation of a girl from the normal desires of life and the parent’s love and affection which takes away the life of the girl is the emphasis in the story Yamini. The plight of women who are considered as reproductive machines and have to bear more children is beautifully described in the story “Daktaramma’s Room”.

Human instincts of fear and pain one experiences when someone or something they are very fond of and are very much attached to, gets separated from them (especially when they don’t have any one to shower their affection on) is clearly depicted in the story
“A Knock at the Door”. It expresses the psychological turmoil of two sisters (widows) when they learn that the apple of their eye – Gopi is going to be taken away by his father; and the cravings of a son to join his father. Through the story she depicts the way of life that one has to accept.

Nilamani and Vasanti are two widow sisters whose sister Radha has committed suicide and her only six month son Gopi has been abandoned by his father. From then onwards Gopi becomes the sole purpose of their life and they bring him up for eight years with care and affection. During his ninth year his father visits him and writes a letter to the two sisters informing that he wants to have his son with him. When Gopi is announced of this turn of events his face lights up with eagerness. This shocks the two sisters and they resolve to allow the boy to have his own way. The mental torture the two sisters face due to this sudden change is beautifully pictured by the author. Even a knock at the door terrifies them.

A knock sounded at the front door. The sisters violently startled, raised their heads. They stared at each other with eyes wide with panic. Vasanti rise slowly, her legs almost giving way under her. She staggered towards the door. She hesitated for a moment. Her heart fluttered wildly. Her hand shook over the bolt. Unable to grip. (12)

When they find that the man who knocked the door isn’t Gopi’s father they feel relieved. “The two sisters felt a little relieved. And relieved they would continue to feel till the next time someone should knock at the door.”(12) Thus the grip of fear that entangles the two sisters is beautifully expressed by the author. The two women in the story Nilamani and Vasanthi are ordinary women with love and affection. Though Gopi is not their own son, they love him more than his own mother could do. There is no jealousy or competition between the two sisters. Both of them respond equally to the calls of the child.

When the child called out “Periamma” the aunt responding with “Yes darling” could be either Nilamani or Vasanti. …They loved the boy so dearly that they felt they would have to invent a whole new vocabulary to be able to describe that love adequately.(9)

The author portrays them as affectionate sisters who wish that their sister should not have the same bad luck which they have experienced in their life. “All their hopes
and wishes for their younger sister – that life should bless her with every good that they themselves had been denied...”(9) Between the two sisters, Nilamani is a possessive and over sensitive woman who can not control her emotions. When Gopi is willing to go with his father, she feels as if her own life is being carried away along with Gopi. When Gopi is enthusiastic to join his father she curses the child for his thanklessness. She is over enthusiastic and pours out her emotions without caring for time and place. At the same time she is a cautious woman who warns Gopi against the dangers of being kidnapped. This she might have done this to avoid Gopi going with his father.

“Appa appa appa! What do you mean by that?” Nilamani burst out, “How do you know he is your appa? Some loafer comes visiting you at school after all these years and immediately you start raving about appa. Appa! Could be a child-lifter for all we know. Hereafter, if any stranger come asking to see you, you are to say No, d’you hear?” (10)

She is out spoken and an expressive woman who suffocates Gopi with her shower of love and affection. ‘Nilamani pulled the boy to her and hugged him in a frenzy.’ (10) She is too possessive to apprehend Gopi’s enthusiasm to join his father. When she sees Gopi’s enthusiasm on hearing his father’s desire, she can not control herself.

Nilamani, observing him with twitching lips, shrank within herself for a moment, like one stricken. Then she stood up, frantic, and shaking the boy by the shoulders, cries, “You won’t agree, will you? You won’t leave us and go away with your father, will you? Will you? ...” (12)

She can’t have that understanding to realize the longings of a child to join his father. She curses Gopi, “See how unfair it is, Vasanthi! We regard him as our entire world he doesn’t love us at all – not a bit! As soon as he is told that his father wants him....” (12)

Contrary to Nilamani, Vasanti is delineated as a self controlled and sensible woman who can understand the feelings of Gopi. She does not pour out her emotions in front of the child and even cautions her sister against it. She is portrayed as a practical woman who in spite of her deep attachment to the boy understands his longings to join his father and thinks that what has happened is for the boy’s benefit. She justifies Gopi’s
anxiety about his father. When Nilamani scolds Gopi for his eagerness to join his father, she supports the boy and tries to make Nilamani understand the feelings of Gopi.

“Don’t accuse the child, akka. Why do you assume that he doesn’t love us? Perhaps his classmates ask him where his father is and taunt him about it. Though Gopi has never said anything to us, we don’t know what really passes in his mind. If it is like that, then... then what has happened is....is a good thing for him....isn’t it?” (12)

Her attachment with Gopi is so deep that she is carried away by his thoughts even in the middle of her job and is full of praise for him and knows his needs. In fact, she is proud of him.

Vasanthi, however, could not lose herself in this service of love except in the evenings and nights. She worked in an office. But even there, buoying her up, the memory of Gopi ran like a thread of light through her official duties. What high marks the dear lad had scored in the recent science test, to be sure! Brainy little fellow! (9)

She is equally afraid as Nilamani and has her own apprehensions about Somasundaram’s visit. But as a sensible woman she can reason out the purpose of Somasundaram’s visit to convince her sister.

“Perhaps just to find out how his son is progressing,” Vasanti said, trying hard to believe her own words, “perhaps he is ashamed of his past conduct and just wants to pay us a visit in atonement.”(10)

Through the story the author tries to explain the feelings of desperation and the pain of separation and the strong bond developed by the two sisters with the boy. Knowing that Gopi is not their own son, they have developed a lot of affection towards him and can’t bear his separation. The very idea of his separation shatters them to pieces.

If it is over fondness that brings sorrow in Nilamani and Vasanthi, it is the lack of love that brings sorrow in the story “Drought”. This lack of love makes life a drought. The drought in the literal sense makes the lives of people topsy-turvy. But this kind of drought is bearable when compared to the drought one faces in ones own life due to lack of love. This becomes the theme of the story “Drought”. This story also brings to light how women prefer the physical drought to emotional drought and how they in traditional
India are be forced to bear this kind of drought in their life. The society teaches a married woman that a woman’s place is with her husband no matter whatever the tortures she undergoes. Gomathi is married to a mechanic in a chemical factory in Chennai who tortures her in a beastly manner. Unable to bear his taunts, she flees from her husband and takes refuge in her drought stricken natal home. For her bearing this drought is better than the loveless treatment she receives from her husband. But not only the drought but also the societal paradigm that a married woman should be with her husband makes her mother and siblings drive her back to her husband. Gomathi even pleads the man who has seduced her to take her to his house not as a wife but as a servant-maid to his wife. But the man refuses to do so since his reputation will be at stake if he does so and advises her to go back to her husband and try to win her husband the way she has won him. He further reminds her that he is another woman’s husband and she is another man’s wife. Thus much against her wishes, she is forced back to her husband. The story ends with the girl boarding the train for Chennai. Drought in the story is symbolic of the climatic drought as well as the psychological drought – a condition where in there is no trace of love and affection.

The writer has portrayed Gomati the protagonist of the story as a charming young girl, who can not tolerate the bruises of her husband and runs away to her mother’s home. She is delineated as a girl who does not care for the paradigms of the society - chastity. The author’s version of chastity, “A physical relationship that is based on honesty between all those involved is also a chaste one”. (qtd. Holmstorm, 56) is clearly reflected in the story. In response to C.S Lakshmi’s questionnaire in 1976, Chudamani has said that “‘Chastity’ is nothing other than honesty in one’s way of life.”(qtd. Holmstorm 56) Gomati is attracted and feels indebted to the Panchayat Union chief’s son Ramananathan for the love he has showered on her and the happiness he has given her. The author justifies her deviation from the traditional code of behaviour in her own words to the man of her love as, (indirectly telling that women view emotional security and happiness greater than physical security)

“Your touch was gentle and your words considerate. You made me happy. You weren’t brutal to me. I hadn’t imagined that it could be anything like that between a man and a woman.”(51)
To escape from her husband and to enjoy the tender treatment of her lover, she doesn’t mind becoming a servant to her lover’s wife. She did not care for the society or its abuses. She pleads him,

“I won’t impose myself in any manner. I don’t want you to marry me or even give me money. Let me just stay in your house as a servant. I’ll do your wife’s bedding and look after your children. And whenever you want me I’ll be available. All I ask you is that you feed me” (51)

She is portrayed as a girl who can not bear the physical tortures given by her husband and explains them to the man of her love with a hope that unlike his mother at least he would listen to her and understand her problems.

I cannot begin to describe the atrocities. When he gets drunk on illicit liquor it is even worse. Then his attentions as well as his beatings are simply hell. Once he dragged me to the street and stripped me and branded my thigh with a hot iron. (51)

In order to escape her husband’s tortures she is even ready to accept bad name. She hopes that some one will see her with the village headman’s son and complain to her husband so that he won’t take her back. “I don’t care,” Gomati said in a high-pitched, hysterical voice. “It might even be good if somebody saw us and reported to my husband so that he would refuse to take me back.” (49) She is not happy with her present life and feels nostalgic of her childhood days. As a result she imagines that she has become a little girl again and runs hysterically with imagined happiness.

She got up. And began to run forward. Running, it was easy to imagine that she was a little girl and happy again. As she ran she shed her woman’s body with its shadow of tribulation. She transformed herself with her running, driving her feet faster and still faster, till at last barely brushing the ground with the tip of toes, she became just one nebulous whirl of speed that left her entity far behind…..” (50)

When Ramanathan advises her that she should go back to her husband stating that she is another man’s wife she logically questions him for his act of succumbing to her charm, “Then why did you treat me as a wife? You another woman’s husband, I another man’s wife. Why did you ever touch me?”(51)

Gomati’s mother is a conventional mother who feels that a woman’s place is with her husband. She never gives ear to Gomati’s complaints but keeps on advising her that a good wife should not leave her husband at any cost. May be for her, what all Gomathi is
trying to complain are petty things and they should be silently borne by a wife. “You will pull on with him through thick and thin as a good wife should and will not leave him again whatever happens.” (37).

Through the portrayal of Gomathi’s mother the author tries to portray how the average Indian mother with traditional mind set will behave. Gomathi’s mother tries to act deaf to Gomati’s refusals and pleas. She kept on advising her daughter that she should stay with her husband forever. Even when Gomati tries to explain her the tortures her husband gives her, she pays no attention to them.

“I won’t go,” Gomati said.
“And this time when you go you will be a good wife and obey your husband.”
“I won’t go.”
“You will pull on with him through thick and thin as a good wife should and will not leave him again, whatever happens.”
“I won’t go.”
“A girl should not think of her mother’s place after she is married. You will be good wife and stay with your husband…….”
“He beats me, he tortures me.”
“……You will stay with your husband as a good wife should and will not come running here again. I know you’ll listen to me. You’re a good girl.” (49)

She is also partial in giving her very little food when compared to the other children and she never comes to the support of Gomati even when her siblings scold her. “The mother had distributed the meager supply among her six children and herself. The ration she handed out to Gomati seemed the smallest ……….” (48)

Through her character Chudamani is trying to portray how the motherly qualities of a woman are stripped off by tradition and poverty. The traditional mind set of Indian society that a married woman is no more a part of her maternal family is reflected through the words of Gomathi’s siblings. It is not only the drought but the conventions that turn them selfish. They consider a married off sister as an intruder and a competitor in their share of food. They don’t have the heart to hear and understand her problems but compel her to go back to her husband.

“Shame on you” said one of her sisters, looking at her fixedly.
“To come here and cut in our little food.”
“Why should we feed you?” said another “You are married. Let your husband feed you. It is his duty now, not ours”.
“Why did you come? You are married. You should be with your husband.”
“That piece of food you are eating is ours by right.”
“You are robbing us.” (36-37)

All the people in the story are portrayed as heartless people who are deaf to Gomati’s pleas and refusals. They go ahead with their advice asking her to return to her husband and conduct herself well. In the midst of these heartless people Gomati’s continuous refusal, “I won’t go!” (51) goes unheard.

A woman getting into men’s prerogatives is accepted in modern world. But there are always exceptions. When it has something to do with their freedom to do what they want, society gnaws at it. This particular aspect is addressed by Chudamani Raghavan in her story, “My daughter Shobana”. Talking about the story, the author says,

“It is an outcome of my thoughts on how our society is changing and what departure from the traditional norms it can bring about as a result, departures that must be accepted without inhibition”. (Foreword to “My Daughter Shobhana” 306)

A daughter’s concern for her father and the transition of a tradition bound father to accept the affair of his daughter with ease and the psychological turmoil he undergoes in the process is the theme of the story “My daughter Shobhana”. In this story Chudamani Raghavan subverts the traditional idea of son shouldering the responsibility of parents and demands a suitable change in the parents and society to allow women to enjoy the freedom that is enjoyed by men alone.

Shobhana’s father has lost his eyesight in an accident twenty years ago and consequently he comes under the refuge of his only daughter Shobhana. During her youth, she has got many prospective grooms willing to marry her. Shobhana refuses all the alliances since they are not ready to allow her to continue with her father’s responsibility. As a result, she remains a spinster at the age of 39. One day when Shobhana is out of station on an official tour, Muthu an acquaintance of Shobhana’s father informs him that he has seen her with a man in a hotel two days back and that they have booked a room as a couple. This very news startles Shobhana’s father and the conventional father unable to digest the news feels agitated. Later when he realizes the comforts Shobhana has given him, her sacrifice for his sake and how he has accepted her
as his son and has taken refuge from her, he undergoes transition and gets prepared to accept this break away from tradition with ease.

“And yet I had accepted her as a son and was living comfortably under her protection. Thus I had already, with ease, accepted a social change and a breaking away from tradition. Then why should I hesitate to view her as a son regarding this other matter? She too was a creature of flesh and blood, after all. (316-17)

With this transition he hints her indirectly that he has accepted her style of life by asking her to bring her special friend (if she has any) and that he is glad that “apart from looking after him, she has a life of her own.”(317) The story ends on unambiguous note with Shobhana replying her father, “You say you are glad, and that is enough for me, Appa. It isn’t really necessary that I should bring any……any special friend here.” (317)

Shobhana is depicted as an affectionate daughter who feels that her primary duty is to look after the comforts of her father. She is unlike the traditional girls who look forward to get married ever since they come to age. She is unmindful of the societal norms in terms of looking after her father and also having her own way of life. She is presented as a daughter who has reversed the conventional norm of a parent claiming not to have “left their children lacking for anything”. It was Shobhana who asked her father, “Have I left you lacking for anything Appa (Father)?”(308). Whenever her father urges her to get married she brushes it aside with the question, “What will you do, Appa?”(309). She is a sensible and practical woman. She is not the one to let her father join any charitable trust and look after own life. But at the same time she is not against marriage. She wants a life partner who allows her to look after her father’s needs and who accepts her along with her father. She doesn’t allow the traditions to chalk out her life. For her marriage is not for the society but for herself. So she is very clear about her marriage and the kind of husband she needs. The statements she gives, clearly show her appreciable and balanced stand towards the institution of marriage. It is obvious that the author too holds the same idea towards marriage.

“I have nothing against marriage. I am quite willing to get married. But I can marry a man who will agree to my condition. You come first with me, Appa. Always. I cannot accept anyone who will not accept you”. (309)

On another instance she says, “Surely life does not mean only marriage? I am not sorry about this Appa.”(310) She did not have even the slightest irritation over her present
situation. Chudamani Raghavan presents her as a woman who is so clear about her life over which she would not have any regrets even in future.

She was 39 years old now.
To this day her tenderness towards me had not wavered. There was never any accusation in her voice or manner. There was nothing in her behaviour to indicate that she nursed any discontent, regret, envy or self-pity in her life. Even now it was as if she were telling me with every breath of her loving kindness, “You always come first, Appa.” (314)

Shobhana is a loving, considerate daughter who plays the role of a mother to her father. She can not bear even three days of separation from her father. She has queries towards her father which are full of concern and empathy.

“Have you had your food, Appa?”
“Appa, your mattress is getting threadbare. I have arranged for the ginning.”
“Why are you lying all huddled up, Appa? Are you feeling cold? Let me cover you with a sheet.”
“Can’t sleep, Appa? Shall I read to you?”(312)

Her father is grateful to her for the protected life she has given him. Her father recalls, “She had given me this attendant, as she had given me my entire, protected life.” (313) “She had made all arrangements to ensure that my needs and comforts were taken care of, even when she was away from home or out of town.”(308) When her father expresses that he will join a charitable trust, she retorts immediately, “Send you to a charitable home as if you had nobody to call your own? I don’t want marriage at that price, Appa.”(309)

As she is the only child, she feels it her responsibility to look after her father and she has done it in a better way than a son could do. She even convinces her father saying, “Would I not have supported you if I had been a son? I have the same duty now.” (310). In a gender biased society which criticizes both the parents and the daughter for the delay in the daughter’s marriage she daringly plays the role of a son.

She is projected as a cool and discerning woman. Though she grasps from her father’s words what has happened, she does not feel nervous or anxious about it. She responds wisely and coolly to her father and thanks her father’s friend who according to her guess has carried the news about her affair. A temperament of this sort comes from a strong individuality, so assured of herself having lot of confidence, clarity and control
over what she is doing. When her father asks her to bring ‘her special friend’ saying that he had no objection, she immediately thanks Muthu indirectly hinting that she too has seen him at the hotel. From her words it is clear that Muthu has torn the veil that has shielded Shobhana’s private life from her father thus giving her a great relief. She is presented as a modern woman who has gone in for an alternative for marriage though it is not clearly given in the story. But she doesn’t want to publicize her private life even to her father. She knows the needs of her father and her own needs and hence has charted out her life in a clear cut manner. She has seen to it that she can take care of her father without making any sacrifices of her own. Her words show that she is relieved of the tension of hiding the fact from her father. “You say you are glad, and that is enough for me, Appa. It isn’t really necessary that I should bring any … any special friend here.”

Through the story the author tries to hint at the transition in the thought process of a man and also the changes that are gradually taking place and ought to take place in the society. Through Shobhana’s father she questions the gender discrimination present in the society. Through the story Chudamani Raghavan indirectly hints at the change which she wishes to see in the outlook of the society.

Responsibility of any kind becomes a pressure for anyone. But the way one responds to it differs from person to person. If Shobhana has tackled her father’s responsibility in her own convenient way, domestic responsibility has weighed down Annapurna of “Bunch of Keys”. Woman has been glorified as the mistress of the house and the queen of her domain - kitchen. It has got so infused in the system that in order to live up to the image given to them, women often get wearied and tired. Stress is not the domain of working women alone. Housewives with a lot of domestic responsibilities undergo stress and are weighed down. Chudamani Raghavan has tried to picture this suffocation women undergo due to unlimited domestic responsibilities through the story “Bunch of Keys”. The romantic view that ‘bunch of keys’ symbolize authority is subverted. They no more stand for authority but the responsibilities that weigh women down. In the story, this bunch of keys seems a problem for wife alone as husband always avoids it. Further, the more the number of keys attached to the bunch, the more the responsibility. Ironically, women themselves add these keys and get shackled with the
chains invented by themselves. She tries to portray humorously how the domestic responsibilities pull down a woman in spite of the physical help she receives from her servants. This story subverts the romantic concept of ‘gruhalakshmi’ [Queen of the home] and shows it as a painful role.

Annapurna is a house wife with a son, a daughter and a loving husband. She has a cook and a servant couple to look after all the domestic chores. She has proved herself a good wife and mother. As a cautious house-wife she watches over everything in her house like a sentinel. As a part of her duty, in order to prevent the servants from stealing, she has locked everything in the house and keeps the keys in a bunch and tucks in her waist. But she always feels the bunch of keys weighing her down heavily and feels like getting rid of it. One evening when they go to the beach, she purposefully hides it in the glove compartment and after reaching home announces that they are lost. She does not bother to search for it but stays calm and cool in spite of her husband’s frantic searches. She decides to take the keys from the glove compartment after a few minutes and say that it was lying on the car seat. Those few minutes she wants to enjoy the “pleasure of having shed a burden, just for five minutes, with every second enjoying into permanence” (43)

Annapurani, the house wife and protagonist of the story is a witty and jovial woman who jokes at a serious situation to relieve the tension. When her son and daughter fight on how to call a tin - dabba or dabbi she commented in a lighter vein, “Yes, a dabba is a male tin and a dabbi a female tin.” (39) She is adept at giving witty answers to her husband.

“Oh God”
“Why? What’s happened?”
“Are you god?” she changed it into a joke(40)

Even when her husband complains that the colour of his shirt has changed she wittily remarks, “This is the blue shirt. It has been reborn on this form after a wash. This is the moment for the bard kalamegh to sing a song”. (40) She is poetic at heart willing to enjoy the beauties of the dawn. She feels,

“To hear the birds voices, to see the face of the world revealed as the gray curtains of darkness are drawn aside one by one, to run up to the roof top, to touch the sky, to be a part of that splendour of redness slowly spreading below - it is for these that day should dawn” (39).
But she is the mistress of the house who has to look into each and every detail of the household management. She is considerate and readily sends her servant couple to attend the death of their kinsman. She is portrayed as a mother proud of her children. She feels proud on looking at her daughter’s growth.

Annapurani, proudly gazing at her daughter who looked tall in her maxi, was startled and said: “Oh – anywhere.” Then she smiled and said: “Solachi has grown tall, hasn’t she? Somu was tall from birth. Now, brother and sister make a nice pair.” (40)

But as a housewife she develops hatred towards the bunch of keys which weighs on her heart. A woman’s desire for freedom is shown in her words,

“You run the house for a few days. You look after the locking, opening, everything. Let me eat sleep and bathe on time like the children. I’ll do what I feel like doing and no more. You take all the responsibility”. (42).

But at the same time she also feels that it is neither a great lacking nor small but “just a little weariness” (42) Annapurna’s weariness can be compared to Sita’s longing to go to the forest and live by herself for a few days in Deshpande’s, “The Day of the Golden Deer” which may be due to the dull embrace made routine.

Through the story the author tries to show the heaviness of the responsibilities house-wife shoulders from the ages unknown. It is always viewed as woman’s prerogative but not man’s. Unless they are into it, no body knows the heaviness. That’s why Annapurani in her childhood has teased her mother with tucking keys at her waist. She has not understood the ‘monalisa smile’ given by her mother.

When Annapurni is tired and vexed of the bunch of keys, she is ‘reminded of the time when she and her brothers and sisters used to tease their mother who moved around with the bunch of keys chinking at her waist.’(41) They used to draw parallel between their mother and A.J. Cronin’s novel The Keys of the Kingdom and tease her,

“Amma, isn’t this house your kingdom? So, as far as you are concerned, these are the keys of the kingdom!” …. Now she wondered, had her mother really enjoyed that responsibility and authority? Or was she too suffocated by the tyranny of those keys? Had she smiled because she could not weep?’ (41)
Everyone in the house depend on her for everything. May it be the keys to the garage or the pocket money of her husband, everything is under her control, thus exalting her directly and exploiting her indirectly. Her husband makes her run around even for petty things like picking up the car keys and locking the garage, thus making her more tired.

“Annam, I think I’ve forgotten the car keys in my room. Could you get them, please?”

“This too”, she thought, and brought him his keys. “Thanks. Will you lock the garage after I leave? I’m already very late.” He took the car out without waiting for her reply. Annapurni stood looking after him for a few moments. Then she locked the garage and put the key on his table in the house. (40)

If self imposed responsibilities that tire and chain the women are discussed in “Bunch of Keys”, the problem of marriage and dowry, and gender discrimination are discussed in “Counting the Flowers”. In Indian society marriage of a girl becomes the top most priority for parents ever since she is born. Hence many parents view girl child as a burden to be relieved off as early as possible. In this process they go to the extent of bringing ill-matched alliances to their daughters and sometimes use their daughters as a bait for the benefit of their sons not paying any attention to the feelings of the girl. Chudamani tries to picture this plight of a girl whose father is trying to fix up her marriage with a lame boy through the story “Counting the Flowers”. Through the story the author conveys the realities in everyday life wherein the education and the job of the groom are taken into consideration to increase the dowry rate while his physical disabilities are overlooked. Getting a bridegroom for a girl is difficult. Getting him for a less dowry is something unimaginable. For a poor father it is much more difficult. A scope to cut down the dowry comes when there is defect on the groom’s side. When the girl is beautiful, the girl’s father has a larger scope to bring down the dowry. Here, the girl will not have any say except to accept what her father has decided. Further, she also becomes a scapegoat of gender discrimination. She often may have to sacrifice her dreams and desires for the welfare of her family especially her brothers. In such circumstances, both the girl and her mother become helpless. This is the usual condition of the girls born in lower middle class family in Indian society. This becomes the story of Brinda in “Counting the Flowers”.
Brinda is a beautiful young girl born to poor parents. During the bride viewing arranged with a lame groom her father exploits her beauty to bring down the dowry and uses her as a bait to get his son educated. The groom attracted by Brinda’s physical charm finally comes down to accept the cut down in the dowry. But Brinda all through the bridal interview and afterwards concentrates on the beauty of the Nagalinga flowers which she sees from the window and tries hard to count them. Though she tries hard to divert her concentration on the Nagalinga flowers, she can’t succeed and finally instead of the Nagalinga flowers, she sees the lame legs. “And even as she was counting, suddenly the flowers seemed to vanish and she saw on the tree four dozen lame legs”. (96). This story reveals the bargain as it takes place in the society. Bride not having education, her inability to cook well, her dark complexion, the grooms education, job, salary are the factors that increase the dowry rate. It doesn’t matter even if the groom does not look good. Whereas the good looks of the girl, her capacity to cook well and the physical challenge of the groom are the factors that decrease the dowry rate. But the irony here is that the negotiation goes on in the very presence of the girl and the boy. The cruel and latent inhuman nature is exposed here.

“Uneducated,” said the boy’s mother. “You ought to give us three thousand rupees more for that reason alone.” (89)

The boy’s mother spoke sharply, “All said and done, he is a man. What does a man’s appearance matter? Is he not educated? Is he not employed? (93)

“That’s a laugh. What effrontery! It was only because the broker said the girl wasn’t too bad looking that we agreed to this small sum. Normally a boy’s parents would expect not less than thirty thousand rupees”. The girl’s father glanced at the boy “For this boy?” He did not voice the question, but the boy flushed and instantly pulled in his right leg under his dhoti. His parents, too, felt abruptly silent” (90)

Brinda is a girl of wheatish complexion, more than average height, with a “luminous air of easy, natural grace about her that brushed aside poverty as one might shake off a fly”. (84) She is educated only up to the eighth standard. Like any average Indian girl she learns to cook well and for the father it is a talent that can make the bridegroom’s party to consider her. She is portrayed as a casual girl who does not bother about the traditional formalities and hastens to sit in front of the groom’s party which is
not liked by the groom’s mother. Right from the beginning she concentrates on the beauty of the Nagalinga flowers and nothing else. When her father is busy exhibiting her virtues before the groom’s party, she is bent on talking about the beauty of the Nagalinga flowers. “Do you know how absolutely beautiful these Nagalinga flowers are?” Brinda’s voice cuts into the exchange, “People walk down the street grazing at this house. And everyone in ten is sure to come in to ask for a few of them to be used in worship ….”(92)

Brinda is a submissive girl who does not have the courage to oppose her father despite his going wrong. Initially when her father asks her to wear the georgette sari she understands that he is trying to expose her beauties in front of the groom’s party and hence does not easily obey him. When compelled she does it unwillingly.

“Go, change into the georgette that your friend Meenakshi gave you last week. Don’t you want to show it to aunty? Get up.”
Brinda did not stir.
“Get up and go in now, will you?”
Brinda shut her eyes for a moment, tight, and then opened them again. She got up and went into an inner room. (93)

She is a girl who tries hard to divert her attention from the business bargain going on in the name of bride viewing. From the beginning to the end, she concentrates on the Nagalinga flowers. She has some similarities to ‘Yamini’ in getting herself lost amidst the hustle bustle. But unlike Yamini she is submissive and obeys her father’s words. She speaks neither against her father nor against the match fixing process.

She is delineated as a girl who can compromise with the situations and call the champak flowers superior to jasmines, roses and champaks despite the fact that they have a strong pungent odour the next day. This symbolically suggests her trials to consider the lame groom high of all.

But finally she is unable to control her mind and can see only the lame legs but not the flowers on the tree. It is an indication of the overwhelming grief within her due to the ill-matched marriage fixed by her father. She is an ordinary girl who can not completely divert her attention despite her trials. She secretly hopes the alliance to be given up due to the dowry. So, when the boy agrees to the cut off in the dowry she loses heart. “Brinda counted the nagalinga flowers feverishly. One, two, three, four, ….”(95)
Brinda’s mother is delineated as an affectionate mother who can’t tolerate to see her daughter being made a scapegoat. “The girl’s mother sat with her eyes carefully averted from her daughter, afraid that she might break down if she looked at her.” (86). She can not put up with her husband when he tries to expose the physical charms of Brinda to lure the groom by making her wear Georgette sari and pace up and down the room on some pretext or the other. “The girl’s mother got up abruptly and left the room.” (94)

When the groom’s parents are angry with the father’s proposals and are in the point of giving up the alliance, she feels happy about it and becomes courageous to look at her daughter. “Sensing their anger, the girl’s mother’s eyes lit up for a moment in sudden hope. She made bold to turn round and glance at her daughter.” (91) She is not at all happy when the marriage gets fixed up.

The girl’s mother had come out again at the last minute for the formality of seeing the visitors off. When they left, she raised her head and looked straight into her husbands eyes…….. The girl’s mother turned towards her daughter. Then she looked away teetered and sat down. (95-96)

The boy’s mother is depicted as a dominating, egotistic woman and an average Indian mother-in-law who is highly influenced by the dowry system. She can’t bear her husband inviting the girl to sit and the girl sitting down immediately. “Was it not for her to invite the girl to sit down? And the girl, too, had sat down at once. Really!” (85) Though she has been informed of the girl’s education earlier, she enquires and makes fuss about it for two reasons. “Just for the pleasure of saying, not good at studies?” (86) and to increase the dowry in that pretext. “Uneducated”, said the boy’s mother. “You ought to give us three thousand rupees more for that reason alone.” (86) She is a tradition bound woman who feels that a groom should maintain certain prestige and when she sees her son not doing that she can not control her anger. “His mother seethed inwardly. Did the wretched boy have no pride, for God’s sake? (87) She has a feeling that the more dowry one takes, the more valuable they are.

“What is a marriage without the boy’s people getting at least twenty thousand rupees?” (89)
“Normally a boy’s parents would expect not less than thirty thousand rupees.” (90)
She has a feeling that if a boy is educated and employed, he is qualified to demand more dowry no matter how he looks and whatever the disabilities he has. “All said and done, he is a man. What does a man’s appearance matter? Is he not educated? Is he not employed?” (93) But with all her villainy she can not do anything against her son’s wishes and has to accept the cut down of dowry.

The author tries to hint at the gender discrimination and show how the father is not bothered about the kind of husband his daughter gets. He is only concerned to see that somehow or other she gets married off. Even the likings of a girl are not taken into consideration.

When Brinda can’t take a daring step to refuse the ill-matched marriage that is forced upon her, Shankari of “Nangam Ashram” is a courageous girl who marries thrice and the men are of her own choice. Nothing can bind her – neither the traditions nor the family ties. And the author compares the journey of Shankari through all these to the different stages a man goes through before he gets to the final stage of renunciation. These four various stages, that hitherto have been seen in man’s life, Chudamani Raghavan traces in woman’s life too. “Nangam Ashram” talks about the four stages of a man’s life:

*brahmachariyam* (bachelor and student); *grihasta* (householder); *Vanaprasta* (living in detachment in the forests) and *Sannyasam* (complete renunciation) as it means to a woman. It also talks about woman’s liberation. (Tharu, Foreword to “Nangam Ashram” 325)

The story begins with Professor Gnanskandan returning form the cremation ground after cremating the body of his wife Shankari. On the way he meets Shankari’s former husband Murthy. Shankari’s past life is revealed to the readers through their conversation. Shankari is an educated woman who has fallen in love with a boy called Manohar in her sixteenth year and has married him with the consent of her father. When the boy dies in her twenty-first year, she marries Manohar and leads a happy married life with him and bears two sons. In her thirty-eighth year when she feels an intellectual urge within her, she understands that her husband can not cope up with her intellectual passion, takes divorce from him and marries her professor who is her father’s friend and twenty years older to her. She always views him as her professor with whose guidance
her ‘mind grows like a child.’ But when she realizes that she requires solitude for final fulfillment she asks for divorce from the professor to which the professor denies since he has ‘grown too attached to her.’ (333) Then she escapes by falling from the balcony of the flat. Murthy unable to understand the reason why Shankari has asked for divorce from the professor comments if she wants to marry for the fourth time to which the professor starts analyzing the reason behind her odd behaviour. According to the professor when she was in the state of emotions, she was with Manohar. But she had physical fulfillment with Murthy ‘as a woman and mother’ (332). When she realized intellectual urge she married the professor. Finally when she realizes that ‘her supreme fulfillment requires total solitude of self’ she asks for divorce from the professor to which he denies. Hence she escapes by committing suicide in the pretext of an accident. According to the professor Murthy is generous to let her go her way, but he is not. He has been too possessive of her, which becomes the cause of her death.

Shankari is portrayed as a forerunner of the Women’s Liberation Movement who behaves the way she likes. By describing the four ashrams in Shankari’s life, the author tries to project the similar kind of emotional stages a woman is capable of going through like men as coded in ‘Hindu philosophy’. Through this the author indirectly states that human feelings are not bound by gender. May be it is the societal paradigm that must have made people purposefully overlook these stages in women. Though born as a woman she lives the stages of life like a man and fulfills her needs like a man. When she feels that emotional, physical and intellectual requirements of her body are fulfilled, she understands that “her supreme fulfillment would require total solitude of self, she broke away from all bonds, including marriage.” (332) She is an unconventional woman unchained by the traditions that chain an average Indian woman. Nothing can bind her. She does not have any sentimental attachment either to her family or her children. In the words of the professor,

Relationships, associations, obligations, marriage, family - she gave up everything, or rather, she experienced and outgrew everything. She wanted to liberate herself in order to be alone. (332)

In her attitude to life, she is above an average Indian woman who finds her identity either in her parents or husband or children. Morgaret Cormack commenting about Indian
women says that the women who have western influence on them alone will try to establish their identity apart from the family:

The concept of the woman’s self is not that of an individual as the Western woman sees herself, but more like a cog in the family machine. Therefore it is not surprising that the Hindu woman feels a strong identification of self with the family. It would be almost inconceivable for her to think of herself as separate from her family – and that apparently happens only in cases of much Western influence. (Cormack, 189)

But it doesn’t look so in the case of Shankari. Chudamani Raghavan never talks about the western influence. “Nangam Ashram” was written in the year 1972. It was a time when the society scorned at the widows who married or the women who got separated from their husbands. Shankari can be compared to the Avvayyar who out grew the familial bonds in her quest for knowledge.

Surprisingly she is portrayed as a woman who wants to identify herself as an individual but not as a cog in the family machine. She is delineated as an honest but determined woman. One doesn’t find Shankari hiding her feelings and living an artificial life. If she is not satisfied with the life she is leading, she has the honesty to ask for divorce from her husband. When her second husband Moorthy grants her the divorce she asks for, everything goes on well and she marries the Professor. The attraction she has for the professor is intellectual passion not the physical passion as she confesses to him.

I have always admired the depth of your knowledge. For me, no one could compare with Professor Gnanasketan. After all these years, it is those very qualities I need, professor. Those things that I admired then, I cherish now and I have come to you. (329)

But when the Professor refuses to give her divorce, she searches for the other way to freedom – suicide. She is a lovable person who has such a hold on her previous husband that he can not tolerate her suffering.

“I can’t bear even to think how much she must have suffered.”
“You must be wondering why she still has such a hold over me.” (327)

Her independent quality can be understood by both her present and her former husband. And the Professor exclaims:

“We both know, don’t we, Mr. Murthy, that she was an independent soul. Nothing could keep her bound.” (333)
Professor seems to be the only person who can understand her properly.

She had a maturity that demanded completeness, depth and knowledge. She had claimed them as her birth right. She couldn’t be caged. She was an independent soul. We create barriers and we create freedom. She was beyond all that. (326)

Feelings and desires are similar for both man and woman. Our Indian society that can understand the needs of a man overlooks the needs of a woman. It fails to understand the fact that Chalam tries to emphasize through his writings "Woman too has a body; it needs exercise. She has a brain; it needs knowledge. She has a heart; it needs experience" (qtd. Praveen Marthanda)

Chudamani Raghavan through her story “Sriram’s mother” tries to bring to light the psychology of a woman who becomes widow at a very young age and remains a widow all her life in order to bring up her only son and her plight when this son falls in love with a girl and gets married. It is the story of a young, widowed, possessive mother whose possessiveness is shackled to the earth, the moment she hears her son’s love affair. Gender discrimination and turning of tables in a similar situation is the paradox in the story.

Gayathri, the protagonist is the mother of a handsome young chap who falls in love with a girl and announces this to his mother. Instead of asking for her consent to their marriage, he declares his wish to get married to his lady love. Gayathri, a forty six year old lady who seems young and beautiful has been a widow for 21 years since her twenty fifth year. “Her youth was abruptly arrested one rainy evening twenty one years ago by a lorry-motorbike collision on a narrow street in Park Town.”(47) Ever since her husband died, her son Sriram became the only source of solace for her in her moments of despair and agony.

Minutes and hours- days, weeks, months – fell into one dense darkness of bewildermert (… this can’t be true… this can’t be true….) as she shivered through sleepless nights pressing her son to her chest. (42)

She had developed a deep attachment for her son and became possessive of him.

When he announces that he is in love with a girl, she feels her whole being shackled to earth. But to hide the reality, she continuously announces everyone and even lifeless things that she is happy. It is a kind of hypnotism that she is trying with. But
finally she succeeds in her effort and seems to be happy on the day of her son’s marriage. The story ends on an unambiguous note without revealing whether she has really changed or she is acting.

Gayathri is a beautiful woman with a small well-proportioned womanly form. “With an ivory-fair skin and thick black hair” she can be singled out in any big crowd. “She walked proudly erect, thrusting her chest out, a queen conscious of her empire of loveliness.” (43) Her husband Mukundan used to appreciate her beauty with “a twinkle in his eyes” saying “Small is beautiful”. (43) At the age of 46 too she looked stunningly beautiful and is admired by her colleagues. She has “petite shapely figure”, “large eyes: “dark hair where just a couple of strands near the right temple showed reluctantly white as though graying under protest.”(47) Though she doesn’t show it openly, in heart of hearts she takes pride of her beauty. Whenever people pass comment on her beauty, she ‘acknowledges the compliment with a demure smile.’(47) One of her colleagues Ramanathan a great admirer of her beauty, is the one who gives her compliments often. He is the person who tries to inject into her the thought of getting married again. He would say, “You look so young,” and “If you had been born in America… you could have married again long ago.” (47) Even her daughter-in-law acknowledges her beauty when she says, “I did not know that my future mother-in-law would be such a young and beautiful woman!”(46)

Chudamani Raghavan doesn’t depict the social stigma that is attached to a widow in Indian society like being treated as a bad omen and not being invited for the functions and all. But she ponders on the emotional and mental agony a widow silently suffers unseen by others. Her loneliness, her getting old, her separation from her son who is the sole purpose of her life, her jealousies, her enigmas, dilemmas and conflicts are beautifully portrayed. Chudamani Raghavan has succeeded in bringing this part of an educated, working widow into light in this story.

The loneliness that haunts a widow doesn’t spare Gayathri. She could find solace in her son who is “Her all” when she “fell into one dense darkness of bewilderment…as she shivered through sleepless nights” by “pressing her son to her chest.”(42) But when this son grows up and announces “I am in love with a girl”(43), the loneliness that has temporarily left her starts engulfing her with much more intensity. One can find Gayathri
thinking and moaning through the nights lying all alone in the bed. “She could not sleep that night.”(44) Even on the day he brings Anitha to her “Her sleep was fitful that night. The jagged fragments of sleep were heavy with formless images. In one of the nightmares she saw herself awake but her eyelids were drooping. Weighted. With rejection.”(45) Even before the wedding “She lay awake in bed.”(47) “She sat for a long time without moving. She sat hugging herself, crossed arms pressing against her breasts, head hanging down, limp, like a lifeless thing. And the tears rose from some dark, primordial source.”(48) After some days of her husband’s death, she gets used to idea that her son is her only companion and became happy in his service. When she learns that her son is in love with a woman, the loneliness and the tears that had left her temporarily engulfs her once again. Quite often she feels lonely and depressed where the tears become her companion.

She becomes jealous and over sensitive where her son is concerned. This happens because she becomes so attached to her only son ever since her husband died. She becomes so possessive of him that the very words that he fell in love and he needs another woman in his life irritates her; the very thought of the girl her son wants to marry provokes jealousy in her. She is relaxed a little when she finds her future daughter-in-law ‘Anitha’ as a plain girl “no beauty. Intelligent face…tall…but swarthy in complexion…flat-chested.” (45) But when Anitha pays compliments to her beauty, her attitude changes a bit to that of soft towards Anitha. But her jealousy towards Anitha as a woman taking her place doesn’t leave her completely. She tries to suppress her sorrowful feelings, saying time and again “I am very happy that my son is getting married.”(47) Even in the beginning of the story, one finds her repeatedly saying, “I am happy.”(42) But now and then her jealousy finds its expression in her sorrowful thoughts and in slapping her servant maid.

The author through the story tries to portray the fact that in the same age of twenty five where a woman’s youth has ended, the youth of a man blossomed to its full. Due to over possessiveness she feels jealous of the girl with whom her son is in love with.

She had coffee ready the next afternoon. Nothing special about that. You offer coffee to any visitor. Perhaps she should also offer tiffin to the girl? But not Mysorepak. Certainly not Mysorepak, that she had made especially for her son.
Besides, this was no festive occasion that you should serve a sweet. It wasn’t as though the engagement ceremony was being held. (45)

Gayathri is an over-sensitive woman whose jealousy vanishes when she sees that the girl is of ordinary looks and when the girl praises her beauty.

When she saw the girl she relaxed a little. Anita, dressed in simple printed cotton sari and greeting her hostess with joined palm and a bright “Vanakkam, amma” was no beauty. (45)

When she comments on Gayathri’s beauty, “I didn’t know that my future mother-in-law would be such a young and beautiful woman!” (46) Gayathri serves the girl not only tiffin – rava dosas - but Mysorepak as well along with coffee.

She is an envious and weak minded woman who can not tolerate to hear anyone saying that her son needs a wife and hence slaps her servant maid when she declares that her son needs a wife. After that a kind of restlessness overpowers her and makes her feel insecure. She is a down to earth mother who asked her son whether he still cared for her. “You….you care for your old mother, don’t you son?”(45) Like any ordinary mother she has her own dreams of accompanying her son to any corner of the world and cook his favourite dishes for him

Will my son be another Srinivasa Ramanujan ? He can go to a contemporary Professor Hardy any where in the world and I’ll go with him and cook his favourite brinjal koottu for him and keep house for him. (43)

When her son announces his love affair to his mother for the first time, she burns her fingers with the hot iron out of shock. The words, “How could she have been so careless?” (43) might point out her carelessness with the iron or her son.

Gayathri is a woman of pleasant character who makes the servant brood over the change in her instead of lambasting her. “Ammma was a kind woman and had never struck her before. What happened to her,” Valli wondered. (46) She is delineated as a beauty-conscious woman who is happy to hear people say that she is young. That’s why even when Ramanathan comments that she is young she takes it in a lighter vein.

She is a woman who has the capacity to hide her feelings. Though she is inwardly very disturbed and sad, she appears to be happy to the people. In this aspect she can be compared to the lady doctor in Shashi Deshpande’s “A Liberated Woman” where the
lady doctor who in reality is a caged bird has been hailed as the liberated woman in the magazine by the interviewers.

She feels unsecured and on learning that her son has fallen in love and is going to get married feels totally alienated and deserted. “At age forty-six it was still standing bewildered, stunted, not knowing how to cope with the anomaly, how to clear the yawning chasm of loneliness.” (47) She is not very clear of her needs and very much confused of her life. The day Sriram announces that he is going to bring his lover the next day; she was overcome with a feeling of insecurity. Out of her unsecured feeling, she spends many restless nights but she cautions herself that it was due to overwork. I am too tired to sleep, she told herself. Too tired making the marriage preparations. That is why I am not able to sleep……..She sat for a long time without moving. She sat hugging herself, crossed arm, pressing against her breasts, head hanging down, limp like a lifeless thing. And the tears rose from some dark, primordial source. (48)

Anitha, Gayathri’s future daughter-in-law is an intelligent girl with good manners and honesty, who knows how to capture the hearts of people. Gayathri regards her as the one who has attracted her handsome son in spite of her ordinary looks. Anitha, dressed simple printed Cotton sari and greeting her hostess with joined palm and a bright “Vanakkam, amma,” was no beauty. Intelligent face, yes… Tall, yes (Perhaps a little too tall for a girl?) but swarthy in complexion. And good almost flat-chested! Whatever did her handsome son see in this ….this person? (45).

She is honest and outspoken and with her ‘frank admiration’ captivates the reluctant Gayathri and makes her serve tiffin with sweets.

“I didn’t know that my future mother-in-law would be such a young and beautiful woman!” she said. Gayathri served the girl not only tiffin - rava dosas - but Mysorepak as well along with coffee. (46)

Through the story the author tries to present the feelings of insecurity of a widowed mother with only son undergoes when she is being deprived of the only pleasure that she has in her life – her son. Her modesty doesn’t allow her to show her resentment, anger and ill feelings that she develops in the process outwardly. But they
find expression in her sleepless nights, bitter tears, loneliness and the slap she gives to her servant.

Due to the effect of patriarchal society, Gayathri feels estranged and lonely because of her son’s marriage. In fact she has not realized that she can have another woman to share her feelings and woes. Will this new bond be a permanent one? Do the relatives who become closer due to marriage get estranged from each other when the marriage is dissolved? When the man who is freed of the marriage bond and can marry for the second time, why can’t the woman do the same thing to build social justice? Chudamani muses on these questions in her story “Two Women on an Evening”. It is a story in the feministic perspective based on sisterhood. It implies the basic fact that all women belong to the same category and are bonded with sisterhood. In “Two Women on an Evening” the ex-sisters-in-law Hema and Tulasi meet in a shop when Hema is caught up in a predicament with a few rupees lacking to settle her bill. Tulasi comes to her rescue and helps her with the deficit money. At first Hema is reluctant to accept the help, but later accepts it. Then they go to a restaurant to have coffee and ice-cream. Tulasi praises Hema for her achievements as a journalist. Hema has been married to Tulasi’s brother Damodharan. Initially he feels proud of his wife’s talent as a free lance journalist. But gradually ego over-powers him and he forces her to give up her job as a journalist. When she resists to that, he divorces her and gets ready to marry for the second time. Hence Tulasi asks Hema why she too can’t marry for the second time and says that “it would demonstrate a basic justice.”(47) Then they go on their way.

Hema is portrayed as a woman of self-respect who is not willing to accept help even from an acquaintance. Initially she looks at Tulasi as her rival since she is her ex-sister-in-law. She is a cautious woman who suspects Tulasi’s friendly approach as a trap to her. “Perhaps Tulasi, with such honeyed talk, was trying to trap her back into the old set-up.”(143) She accepts Tulasi’s friendship only when she talks high of her profession and calls her by her maiden name.

Hema felt Tulasi had dispelled all her misgivings at one stroke. By praising her article, she had acknowledged Hema’s status as a journalist. And in say ‘Hema Nagarajan’ she had indicated that she accepted the validity of that name.(143)
She feels that a woman’s relationships that come through marriage and are gone the moment the marriage is dissolved. “But Tulasi, can you help feeling a certain distance from me? Can you really maintain an impartial attitude between…..between your brother and me?” (144)

She is an ordinary woman who in spite of her name and fame tries her best to dance to her husband’s tunes. When Damodaran shouts at her for typing in the house, she sits down quietly at night with pen and paper to escape it. But she is very particular not to give up her profession. When he asks her to choose between her profession and her husband, she chooses the former. As a woman with self respect and self-identity she gives divorce to her husband when he tries to overshadow her will and identity as a working woman outside her family life.

She is characterized as a woman who takes life in an easy way. When Tulasi informs her of her brother’s second marriage she wishes whole heartedly that he should find happiness in his second marriage. “Is that so? My best wishes to him. I hope he finds happiness at least in this marriage.”(147)

She is self-confident and feels that marriage is not much important for a woman. That’s why when Tulasi advises her to get married, she asks, “Do you think marriage is all-important to a woman, Tulasi?” (147)

She also declares that she is at peace after her divorce and feels it her responsibility to look after her parents.

“Where do you live now, Hema?”
“With my parents. They too need my support.”(146)

“………..
“I live a peaceful life now.” (’147)

Tulasi is delineated as a modern woman with the feelings of feminism who feels that man and woman are equal. “If a divorced man can find re-marriage so easy, why not a divorced woman as well?”(147). She urges Hema to get re-married to demonstrate a basic justice. She is the fore-runner of sisterhood to feel that the basic bond of sisterhood between two women is stronger than any other bond.

“But I have a bond with you too, Hema! In fact, a much more basic bond”
“And what is that ?”
“We both are women” (144)
She is an advocate of friendship.

“Friendship is also a relationship, Hema. Two people get acquainted in some context. Then, if they become friends in their own right, the friendship can continue even after the original context has changed” (144).

One doesn’t find any kind of resentment, jealousy or revenge in her for Hema who has given divorce to her brother. She represents the kind of women who respect self-respecting women. She is considerate, respecting and welcomes the decision taken by Hema and calls her by her maiden name which shocks Hema too. She even says that she feels proud of Hema’s achievements. With her friendly behaviour she drove away the suspicions of Hema.

Tulasi had dispelled all her misgivings at one stroke. By praising her article, she had acknowledged Hema’s status as a journalist. And in saying “Hema Nagarajan she had indicated that she accepted the validity of that name. (143)

Hema can be compared to Shobhana of “My Daughter Shobhana” in her view of giving marriage the least importance and Tulasi can be compared to Shankari of “Nangam Ashram” in considering second marriage as a right for women.

The torture a woman faces in the hands of an egotistic husband is negligible when compared to the torture faced by a woman due to dowry problem. In the earlier case the victim is the girl alone and nobody else. But in the latter case the girl’s parents too suffer along with the girl. Dowry problem and the torture in the hands of in-laws is the theme of the story “The Slayer of Narakasura”. Padma’s parents belong to a middle class family with a daughter Padma married off and a son - a five year old one, Babu. The child is a silent witness to the tortures faced by his parents at the hands of Kaveri amma - the groom’s mother right from the day Padma got married till her first Diwali celebrated in her natal home. Both at the time of marriage and during this festive occasion, the groom Sridhar’s mother harasses Padma’s parents and makes them dance to her tunes. She goes on finding fault with everything right from the delicacies prepared by Padma’s mother to the diamond ring presented to her son. This disheartens Padma’s parents who hang their faces in humiliation. Babu who witnesses all these things suddenly remembers Diwali as a festival that celebrates the destruction of evil and Sridhar’s warning that crackers could
kill people. Immediately he rushes to the inner room, takes a series of crackers, lights them and throws them upon Padma’s mother-in-law. All of them are shocked at this act of Babu and his father even beats him and asks him to apologize to the lady for his misdeed. But Babu bluntly refuses to do so and even affirms that he did it as he wanted to kill her. When asked the reason for his deed, he lists the harassment given by the lady to his parents and says that he wants to kill her as she is the Narakasura. This brings a change in the lady and she turns out a new leaf. Thus the story has a cinematic ending.

This story has a variety of characters such a Padma, her husband Sreedhar, her mother-in-law Kaveri her parents and her brother Babu - the only child character and the protagonist of the story. Padma is a typical Indian girl who changes herself according to her husband’s tastes immediately after marriage. She is submissive and is obedient both to her parents and her mother-in-law. She represents the women who silently accept the harassment from their in-laws without questioning them.

And at that very moment Mami shouted, “Padma, where is my towel?” from somewhere in the house and immediately Akka called back, “I’m coming” and went to running to her. (27)

Her jovial nature seems to be dried up by the marriage. Now she becomes so reserved keeping herself at the beck and call of her mother-in-law. Her brother Babu could see this transformation in her. “She has lost her old jolly look and manner. Her eyes keep darting timidly towards Kaveri Mami, every now and then.” (27) She becomes her old self only when she is out of sight of her husband and her mother-in-law. When she goes out with Babu to greet some of their relatives, Babu ‘pinched her arm fondly and playfully, saying, “New Pinch!” She did the same to (him) and (they) laughed together. This was my old Akka.’ (28)

Padma’s mother, too, is portrayed as a typical Indian house wife whose only aim is to look after the family welfare and see that her daughter lives in peace. As most of the Indian mothers do, she also feels that her daughter’s in-laws are superior to them and they should be given utmost respect. She gives utmost importance to her daughter’s mother-in-law. She and her husband act as if they are slaves to her. The words of Babu reflect the importance they pay to Padma’s mother-in-law, “From the way they danced attendance on her, you would think she was some sort of queen, and my parents her slaves.” (29)
She is a patient mother who puts up with the naggings of Babu. She is the one who gets up with the lark to see to the household arrangement. She is a good-natured woman who has taken a resolution not to take a single paisa from her daughter-in-law. Whenever Padma’s mother-in-law humiliates her, she bears it with silence without talking back. She is so frightened of Kaveri Mami that when Babu flings crackers on Kaveri, she “seemed to sway on her feet, ready to drop down.” (32).

Kaveri Mami is an image of that typical Indian mother-in-law known in Indian society for her harassment of her daughter-in-law’s people in the name of dowry and custom. She is a tall and hefty woman – a demon both in terms of her personality and her character. Despite being a woman, she finds fault with everything Padma’s mother prepares for her.

“The idlis are like rock,” Mami complained, “So is the Mysore Pak. You should supply a hammer with it so that one can break it into bits to eat it. I haven’t tasted the other sweets or the savouries yet. I am afraid to.” (29)

With all these flaws she is a flexible woman who can be easily corrected for she gets changed on Babu’s pin-pointing her mistakes.

Problems for women start with marriage. But they change their shape and intensity from time to time. If dowry is the problem for a newly married woman, after some years of marriage continuous child-birth becomes a problem for her. “Daktaramma’s Room” depicts the plight of women who are considered reproductive machines and not human beings. Devaki the protagonist of the story has given birth to six children in her sixteen years of married life within her thirty-second year. Now she is pregnant for the seventh time much against her wishes and eagerly yearns that it should be anything else other than pregnancy. She will be happy even if it were a tumor. The doctor advises her husband to get her operated immediately after the birth of her seventh child as her health is in a bad state, but he doesn’t give ear to her words and says that they will have those many children they are destined to have. When the lady doctor talks about Devaki’s abortion or operation, Devaki’s eyes widen with hope that it may put a full stop to all her sufferings. But her husband is adamant about having more children as he has the capacity to rear them. On the way they purchase so many things for the house which Shanmugam carries. On reaching home, he puts it down as if he has carried a heavy
weight through out and says, “SS….Appadaa! How heavy this was! What a relief!”(210) Here the writer subtly satirizes the attitude of insensible men who can not understand the burden of pregnancy. The man who cannot carry a small weight for a little while expects his wife to carry babies after babies every year for nine whole months.

Devaki is depicted as a timid girl who can’t go beyond her husband’s wishes. Though she is pregnant for the seventh time in her sixteen years of married life within her thirty second year she doesn’t have the courage to say ‘No’ to it. But she is so scared of pregnancy that she whole heartedly wills that it should be a tumor or something else other than pregnancy. She yearns that a tumor will be a great deliverance for her as that will give her rest.

‘It wouldn’t matter even if it were a tumor. Wouldn’t matter? Why, that would be a great deliverance! She would go to the hospital and lay herself down in peace. (207)

She asks the doctor with eagerness if her weak health will be the reason for her delayed periods.

“Then by any chance could that be why it’s getting delayed?” A desperate longing lit up her face and set her eyelids aflutter. (207)

The person who knows the ins and outs, pains and sufferings attached to pregnancy can never have a romantic conception of pregnancy promulgated by the society. Devaki wishing that is should be tumour instead of pregnancy subverts the concept of women glorifying pregnancy.

She seems to be a docile woman who speaks every word with great care not to irritate her husband. When her husband is restless about waiting for the doctor, she pleads him to wait for some more time saying that it will be a trouble for him to come over again there. ‘I mean, for you it’s so much trouble all over again, after cautiously spelling it out. (206)

When the doctor said that if she gets operated immediately after the delivery there won’t be anymore problems, she looks at her husband with lots of hopes.

“And if we do an operation as soon as she delivers there will be no more problem”, said Daktaramma. A light blazed up in Devaki’s eyes. With a tremulous smile, She looked at her husband’s face, her own frantic hope blocking it from view (208)
She is a timid, submissive woman who doesn’t have the courage even to cry. For the space of a second, Devaki’s glance froze. The light in it went out. From the trembling of her lips it looked as if she were about to cry. But she did not cry. As though all her bodily fatigue had gathered into a heavy load pressing down on top of her, she hung her head. Her face was vacant. (209-210)

Daktaramma, the minor women character in the story is portrayed as a person who has a lot of concern for her patients. She is experienced enough to understand the problems of her patients even before examining them. As a trained woman she can understand the agony and feelings of another woman. Her understanding of Devaki shows this aspect.

Daktaramma’s trained eyes looked her up and down, observing a wasting of the flesh rather than any slender elegance, Rings under the eyes, a skin that indicated anemia … If she were put to bed she would sleep soundly for a week without a break. (206).

She tries her best to convince Shanmugam to get Devaki operated immediately after her birth, but does not succeed.

The author through the story tries to bring to light the ill-fate of the wives due to the superstitious belief of the husbands that children are god given gifts. She also tries to portray the ignorance of husbands which turn out a curse to women.

Men have their own way of keeping their wives under control. If some men like Shanmugam do it outwardly, there are some men like Saravanan of ‘Sisterhood’ who it under the pretext of love and affection. But the hidden reason behind such kind of character would be their dominating character and egoism. Even traditional wives who are submissive to their husbands appreciate women who can challenge egoistic husbands. These feelings of sisterhood and male ego of a man are beautifully pictured in the story ‘Sisterhood’. Saravanan is a typical average Indian husband who tries to suppress his wife in the guise of love and ideals. He feels that working women will not be submissive and are head strong and hence does not want his wife to work. But he has sugar coated this bitter fact in the name of the ideal saying that it is inconsiderate for two people in the same family to work when there are so many families without a single working person. He exerts full control over his wife, but always under the pretence of love. Like Devakis’s husband in ‘Daktaramma’s Room’ he too is insensible to the feelings of his
wife. He sees that his word has the final laugh in everything. He makes her wear the dress of his choice, cook a delicious, variety supper in spite of her tiredness and throws cooked food on her face. Added to these, he even flirts with another woman. He refuses not only to help his father-in-law financially but also to send his wife to her natal home in times of her parent’s need. But he gives a valid reason for all his actions. Whether or not aware of his intention his wife Prema never opens her mouth against him, but serves him with the same submissiveness.

One day Saravanan brings home the news of his friend Balan’s wife who has sued against her husband asking for divorce. The very thought of a woman asking for divorce shocks Prema. When Saravanan informs Prema that Balan’s wife has got divorce from him, she prepares delicious Badam Kheer to celebrate the occasion. Thus she expresses her feeling of sisterhood and feels happy when the other woman has achieved what she can’t.

Prema is portrayed as an average Indian wife who does nothing other than surrendering herself to her husband. Right from the beginning of her married life, she is a submissive wife who neither talks back to her husband nor does anything against her husband’s wish. Even her egotistic husband thinks of her as,

‘Prema, an appropriate name for her. She was the very embodiment of love.’ (15)

She is meek and prepares a delicious meal at the order of her husband in spite of her exhaustion. She doesn’t have the courage to say that she is tired.

“No, it’s not that. Let’s go home. Homemade food is after all the best,”

They reached home

“Shall I just make some rice and rasam, and fry a couple of appalams? I feel a little ti…..”

Before she could finish he cut in, “Am I a convalescing patient that you dole out a starvation diet to me ? Cook a proper meal with sambar, vegetables and everything”

Doesn’t matter if it takes time.

“I will do it.”(17)
She is a timid girl who does not raise her voice and does not question him both when he refuses to help her father and when she discovers his flirts with another girl. When her father writes to her asking for monetary help to treat her ailing mother, he roars at her talking very ill of her father. He doesn’t even allow her to visit her mother under the pretext of paying hospitality to his sister who is visiting them. Even then she makes no arguments and behaves as before.

She asked her husband’s permission to go home and visit her mother, and he refused because his sister was coming to them with her children for a holiday and she obediently fell silent again. She entered into no argument and created no scene. In her conduct towards him, there was no change. (18)

She without throwing tantrums silently bears her husband’s unfaithfulness when she discovers her husband’s flirts with another woman. She accepts Saravanan’s infidelity in a helpless state.

Later she had found a dainty, perfumed woman’s hand kerchief in her husband’s coat pocket. The truth became plain to her, but even though her eyes showed her deep hurt, she picked no quarrel with him.

“Prema darling, I love you so much,” his voice would whisper into her ear and she, with the expression on her face unchanged, would say, “What tiffin would you like me to make today?” (17).

Prema is a tradition bound woman who can not initially digest the fact that a woman asks for divorce. When Saravanan informs her about his friend Balan’s wife, who has sued a case against him, she was ‘aghast’. “Divorce!” she exclaimed, “A woman asks for divorce.” (17) But the same Prema celebrates the victory of Balan’s wife with payasayam [sweet porridge] when she gets divorce. Thus she exhibits her feelings of sisterhood towards the other woman who has achieved what she can’t achieve.

“What, Paayasam! What are we celebrating today? Our wedding anniversary? No. Is it somebody’s birthday?”
She made no answer. She filled another cup with paayasam and, looking steadily at him, sipped it slowly. (18)

With marriage women become alien to their parent’s house. They rarely speak of their problems to their parents. They try to suppress their agonies within their hearts without letting out. Like Prema of “Sisterhood” who hasn’t opened her heart even to her
parents, Muktha of “The Strands of the Void” also tries to keep her sorrow confined to herself. Only when she realizes that she can no longer keep it a secret she lets it out, that too not to her conventional mother, but to her considerate father. The story “The Strands of the Void” goes round dowry problem and metaphysical conception of God. The protagonist of the story the temple priest has a son and daughter. The son has been killed by a gang of robbers who have pushed him out of the running train. He has left behind him a wife and two sons as the continuation of his existence. As a result of all these incidents the priest loses faith in God. Even when he is praying to God in the Sanctum Sanctorum his mind roams elsewhere and he has least faith in God. Hence he decides to quit the job of the priest and start a business of his own. Mukta, the daughter is married off to a man in a village near Trichy. It has been a month since her arrival, but she has never opened her mouth about the purpose of her arrival. It is only when her mother starts making preparations to see her off to her in-laws home, she opens her mouth and reveals the truth that her husband and her-in-laws have tortured her by placing burning cinders on her palms as a warning for not bringing complete dowry and have sent her there to return with the full dowry. She pours out everything to her father and pleads him not to send her again to her-in-laws. Her father is reminded of the words uttered by the banker’s son who is a devotee that dowry problem has been completely eradicated out of the country and realizes how controversial it is. Then he assures his daughter that she will not be sent to her-in-laws and consoles her that it is not the end of life.

The priest’s wife is portrayed as typical Indian house wife who feels that the place of a girl is with her husband. She can be compared to Gomathi’s mother in “Drought” who feel the same way. She compels her husband to take Mukta back to her husband’s place with the necessary rituals. She is a vigilant mother who can sense that there is something wrong with her daughter’s married life. In spite of it she feels that her daughter should live with her husband.

“There’s obviously something wrong, we should take her and leave her there. She is young, She must live life to the full. Her place is with her husband, whatever the problems.” (150)
She is a responsible woman who is worried about running the household without her husband’s salary. The moment her husband says that he is going to leave the job there is mixed feelings on her face. “On her face … What was it? Fear? Grief? Anxiety?” (151)

She is religious minded and can remain contented about her husband’s profession as a priest. “But I feel a special joy and contentment in the fact that your job is service to God.” (151). Her faith in God helps her bear the sorrows in her life with a hope. She is so religious that she cannot tolerate any statement against God. When her husband tells her that he is doubtful of the existence of God, she exclaims

“Shiva, Shiva! What is this atheism? And that too from a temple priest? In the midst of so much grief it is bhakti [devotion] and puja [worship] that gives us consolation. And you…..” (146).

As an understanding and loving wife she can decipher the psychological turmoil of her husband and comforts him.

She touched me (the priest) gently on the shoulder and gave me a comforting smile, “I understand. But I don’t want to understand. Your mind is not in a proper state just now. Take rest for some time.” She said and went inside. (151)

Muktha is a patient girl who does not want to trouble her parents with her problems. That’s why she does not inform the reality of how her palms have got burnt. Though it has been her mother-in-law and husband who have kept burning cinders on her hands, she tells her parent that she has held a hot pot with her hands spread out. Like Gomati of “Drought” she doesn’t want to go back to her husband’s place. Like Gomati she does not try to tell her parents what really happened at her husband’s house but declares her resolution of never going there.

“I don’t think I will return alive if I go there again,”
“I don’t wish to go back there. Not only now. But for ever.” (154)

She is a caring daughter who keeps awake till her father’s arrival and opens the door even before he knocks it. She serves him food and sees to it that her father eats properly. “I reached home. Even before I knocked on the door I heard the sound of the door being unlatched. Then the door opened. Mukta stood before me.” (142) When her father refuses to have any food she insists that he should have some food. “Appa, take
some rice with reason. After that, some buttermilk. Else, you’ll feel hungry at night. So what if it’s late?” (142-143)

If dowry is the problem for Muktha to lead a happy married life, married life becomes an albatross for Yamin due to her own nature. Yamin is the only daughter of Saaranathan and Perundevi born after two still births. Even after Yamin they have a son born dead.

She was born when night blossomed like a flower. Saaranathan was then thirty-two years old, on a good salary in government service. There were the advantages of inherited wealth, and a house of his own. (6)

In a mood of annoyance he names her Yamin, but for Perundevi, she is her “salvation’. (6) Saaranathan does not relent towards her till her second year, when one day she goes up to him who is sitting “with his head bent down and eyes closed in weariness.” With her “petal soft touch” of “satiny fingers like coral buds coming open and scattering drops of honey” she asked him “Are you crying Appa? Don’t cry.” (7)

He suddenly gathered her up into his lap and held her tightly close to him. From that moment on, his feeling for her was intense, inseparable from his own life.’ (8)

As Yamin grows she loses the “inclination for close association with others.” (8) She helps her mother with household chores but “preferred to sit by herself rather than get caught up in such matters.” (8-9) She finds “solitude completely satisfying by itself” (9) When she attains maturity “She quivered with outrage as though the world had invaded and planted its flag upon her unsullied, solitary inner domain. And she struggled to free herself.” (11) During her eighteenth year when Perundevi fixes Yamin’s marriage with her brother’s Son, Rameshan, Yamin protests.

Mere mention of the word ‘marriage’ provoked her essential being to surge up in revolt. This protest was like hunger, like sleep – a simple, not-to-be-denied instinct. (26)

Saaranathan is a bit confused and apprehensive of getting his daughter married. But Perndevi thinks that everything will become alright once she gets married and hence they go ahead with the preparations for marriage. Four days before the marriage Yamin escapes from the house. The next evening when she is trying to board a train, she is
stopped by the police and is brought home. Amidst her refusals and cries she is married to Rameshan and is sent to her husband’s home. Unable to cope up with her husband she flees from her husband’s home and refuses to go back.

She ran home many times crying and wailing, and each time they took her back. And since returning to her parents home meant being sent back to her husband’s house, she sometimes did not go there either. She would just disappear. But they found her each time and brought her back. (33-34)

She becomes pregnant and as a result develops hysteria. Unable to control her, her husband sends her to her parents saying that he will take her after the child is born. She even tries several times to abort the child but in vain. Everyone hope that once the child is born she will become alright.

Maybe once the child was born she would become normal like anyone else? However strange her propensities – would not the awakening of motherly love be a salve for all her wounds? (35-36)

But things take a different turn. She becomes insane after delivering the child. “Her condition worsened. Finally she had to be admitted to a hospital for proper treatment.”(40) Yaminis child is fair and bright unlike her mother. Her “brightness was immensely soothing.” (40) She is named Geetha. Perundevi’s fear that Geetha too will behave like Yamini is nullified when Geetha shows the enthusiasm of a normal girl child. She becomes the only source of comfort for Perundevi and the child too becomes attached to her. After some days of treatment Yamini becomes normal and is sent home. Her state becomes worse whenever her husband comes to fetch her to his house. One day when Perundevi tries to show the child to Yamini with a hope to bring Yamini back to normalcy, she becomes hysteric again and tries to commit suicide and is prevented by her father and the gardener. Her father Saaranathan is the only person who can talk to her and attend on her. Putting the blame on himself, Saranathan becomes guilt ridden for the state of Yamini. Perundevi is afraid to go near her and also takes care to see that the baby does not come in front of her. Rameshan gets transferred out of Madras and does not come to visit her. “And so Yamini remained calm. Her speech and behaviour were lucid.” (44)

Yamini’s disease had assumed a certain definite pattern. She appeared normal, but whenever she was left alone, even for a brief while, she would rush to the well.
This was the way that her mental disorder expressed itself. Medical treatment could not cure it. (45)

As a result she is locked in a corner room. During these days, Yamini’s father remains her constant companion and takes care of her.

Perundevi would open the door to give her food. Yamini would be taken outside for fresh air, for a stroll, by either her mother or her father. They would not take their eyes from her even for a second. Then she would be led back into the room and locked up once again. (45)

On one such occasion, overcome by the feelings of guilt that he has wronged his daughter Yamini by getting her married, Saaranathan asks Yamini to forgive him to which she replies, “Set me free. I’ll forgive you.” (58) Overcome with pity for her suffering, he bids her farewell and allows her to go her way. She immediately rushes to the well, jumps into it and commits suicide. But to Perundevi he acts as if everything has happened without his knowledge.

After Yamini’s death, Geetha became the only purpose of life to Perundevi. But Saaranathan ‘saw her as the embodiment of the wrong he had done to the other one – to the one embedded in his heart.’ (53)

After Yamini’s death Perundevi convinces her son-in-law that he should get married. He gets married to Vasanthi who seems “well within a comprehensive pattern of growth and change.” (18) They have two sons Mahesh and Ramesh. Since they have no daughter “the special tenderness that was a daughter’s due” is lavished on Geetha. In her nineteenth year Geetha goes on a pilgrimage to Badri, Rishikesha with her friend Meena’s family. On her return Perundevi senses something wrong with her. She is not her usual self. She sits “all alone and brooding by herself, going around in a daze as though there’s something weighing on her mind.” (54) Perundevi thinks that “Geetha too might succumb to the tempting delusion that one could live by oneself, completely content and fulfilled.”(23) She doubts that if Yamini has sought the way of solitude and the night, will “the same incomprehensible urge sought an outlet in the divinity enshrined in temples.”(54) in Geetha. Such thoughts make Perundevi tremble and feel giddy. She prays God to spare Geetha. But when Saranathan hears this, his attitude is different. He views it as an opportunity to correct the wrong he has done to Yamini.
When Rameshan brings a marriage proposal for Geetha, she declares her love affair openly. She has loved a Gujarati, who is the son of Meena’s father’s friend (Meena is Geetha’s friend), “the Madras agent for a steel manufacturing firm up north” and who is in the same line of his father’s business.

They both had met at some festive occasion in Meena’s house. They had had plenty of pleasant occasions to meet and get acquainted during the past year. When they realized they were growing fond of each other, the Badri trip had come up. Geetha had accepted her friend’s invitation only because that young man was one of the group of pilgrims, going to keep his elderly mother company.

On hearing this Perundevi feels relieved and immediately gives her consent. Even her father gives his consent immediately and makes arrangements to visit the boy’s parents the same evening. Seeing all this Saaranathan is very much upset. He is reminded of his daughter. He who has expected Geetha to reject marriage like her mother thinks that he should not mess it up this time and should support his grand daughter in order to compensate the wrong he has done to his daughter. But now hearing Geetha’s love story much contrasted to that of her mother, Saaranathan draws within. He can’t take part in their happy conversations.

That evening the whole family visits the boy’s family and fixes up the marriage. When Saaranathan is informed of all these events, he does not respond except an “Mm”. The memories of his dead daughter over shadow him. He feels that he has been doing a penance for his dead daughter all these ten years, holding her in his memory. He thinks,

Such penance as his, surely deserved reward. Yet for so many years, despite this single-minded devotion, despite this tear-soaked ardour, why had peace eluded him? He was so tired. Would there be no end to all this pining, this restless suffering?! (69)

Overcome with such thoughts he jumps into the well to join his dead daughter.

Yamini’s mother Perundevi is portrayed as a symbol of “Prakruti” or “Matter”. Chudamani Raghavan uses Perundevi to show the stigma the society usually attaches to a barren woman. This is evident in Perundevi’s fear of being called barren and her relief when she gives birth to Yamini after many still borns. “As far as Perundevi was concerned, that baby was her salvation.”(6) She is her “Deliverance, come to rid
Perundevi of her grief.” (7) She enjoys her motherhood each and every moment with the baby. She stands just opposite to Devaki in ‘Daktaramma’s Room’ who considers pregnancy a burden. But Devaki’s weariness may be due to her giving birth to so many children.

As she fed the baby at her breast and fondly tendered her, Perundevi’s heart would swell with pride and pleasure. Watching the tender creature sleep in the crook of her arm, she would be oblivious of the passage of time. (7)

She is an ordinary woman who considers marriage as the very essence of a woman’s life. Unlike Hema in “Two Women on an Evening”, Shobhana in “My Daughter Shobhana” she is a woman who considers married life and various roles a woman has to perform as a wife and a mother as a bliss. She like any mother wishes the same blessing to fall on her daughter Yamini too. A woman of this sort can never understand a woman with a different mind set. That’s why when Saranathan is hesitant to convince Yamini for marriage and is frightened of how Yamini will get on at her husband’s house, she comforts him saying that it would be a dawn for her.

‘Perundevi drew comfort from thoughts of her own married life. She had found fulfillment. Surely marriage would do the same for her daughter. “Just wait and see. It’s going to be a new dawn for her.” Perundevi said, wiping her eyes gently. Yes she did miss her daughter, but it was more important for her child to have a good life’. (32).

She is a woman who wholeheartedly attaches herself to the image of woman ordained by Hindu dharma. Her identity lies in her family. Unlike Hema in “Two Women on an Evening” who gives importance to her career and gives up her married life, she tries to draw fulfillment in doing her motherly duties and her domestic chores. She expects her daughter to behave like the ordinary girls and depend on her for everything. She yearns for Yamini

“to scatter her books around when she came home from school, just so that she might gather them up. By that one act of service, the mother yearned to bind herself to her child, to cast her protective shadow over her.” (8)

She is a tradition bound woman for whom her husband is her everything. She finds contentment and fulfillment within her family. “Her husband was her Kashi, her family was her temple; within these boundaries she had found contentment.” (14)
When the affection she is denied of by Yamini, comes true with Geetha she feels consoled. Hence she finds comfort with Geetha and Geetha is like a source of compassion for her. “She (Geetha) was a badly needed source of comfort to a heart that had grown sore with self blame.” (16)

For the author she is a down-to-earth woman who doesn’t entertain anything other than the roles the society ordained for women. She is no odd or extraordinary.

Her feet were very much on the ground, planted in the dust, and that dust was pure gold to her! ....She was human after all. She needed care, tenderness. A companion to look at and to love. And Geetha was that companion.”(19-20)

No one can find fault with a mother like Perundevi though her over affection to see her daughter to settle like any other girl ended in Yamini turning insane. It is the system in which she has grown that doesn’t allow her to think other than the way she thinks. Her gentle, kind, affectionate nature is evident in her care for her son-in-law and her grand-daughter Geetha. She forces her son-in-law to get married again after her daughter’s death and she never feels even a pinch of jealousy towards Vasanthi who takes the place of her daughter. On the other hand she readily fantasizes that Vasanthi is her daughter.

Perundevi liked her.(Vasanthi) That she had taken her daughter’s place had not made Perundevi Jealous in the least…….
To Perundevi Vasanthi appeared well within a comprehensible pattern of growth and change. In her company one did not need to feel anxious or even agitated, let alone suffer the bewildering fear that she knew only too well. Because she was Rameshan’s wife, Perundevi could fantasize happily that this was her “daughter”; she could imagine her in a normal setting, at least for a little while. (18)

She is an ordinary conventional woman prevalent during 1950s and 1970s and who is present even today in the Indian society who tries to induce the feelings of marriage into the hearts of young children. When Yamini doesn’t agree to play hide and seek game with Rameshan (alias Babu) as they need to touch each other in that game she advises Yamini,

“You shouldn’t say such things, Yamini. Don’t children touch each other when they play games? What wrong with that?” Though acutely aware that she was saying something not really meant for young ears, she went on with a kind of desperate urgency, “If Babu holds your hand, you can’t just brush him off and come away like that! One day he is going to marry you! Remember that!” (28).
Perundevi develops a phobia that the same thing her daughter did might repeat in her grand-daughter Geetha’s life too. This very thought sends shivers down her spine. Since idea of marriage occupies an important place in her life she becomes so feeble minded that on seeing the indifferent attitude of Geetha after her return from the pilgrimage, she begins to fear that Geetha too is going the way of her mother. If Yamini has said that she is not going to get married, Geetha is becoming God crazy is what she fears. From the day of Geetha’s return from her pilgrimage to the day of Geetha announcing her love, she lives in a continuous grip of fear. She prays God not to take away Geetha in the path of her mother and that she wants to see Geetha in the role of a bride, wife and the head of a household - the roles which her daughter refused to play.

“Lord! Even if it only you who are calling her, don’t let it happen! I won’t give her up not even to you! Don’t break my heart. Leave her to this world. At least now let me have the child I prayed for once, the child I was cheated of. I want to see her as a bride! Shy, beautiful! I want to see her as a much-loved wife, as a fine mature woman, the head of a household, who radiates happiness. I want to see her in all these roles. Her feet must rest firmly on the precious earth. This wound of mine that hasn’t yet healed let her heal it forever. Don’t take her away, leave her, let her be……” (23).

Her ready acceptance to Geetha’s wish to marry a boy outside her caste comes from her anxiety to see to that Geetha gets married. When Geetha announces her love affair she feels relieved of her grip of constant fear and tension.

“Perundevi was like a tightly twisted wire that had uncoiled without warning. The relaxing of tension left her shaken and wondering that joy could so closely resemble grief in the manner of its coming.” (63)

Thus Perundevi represents the type of Indian woman who find fulfillment in marriage, husband and children and who can not entertain any other thoughts that do not fit in the frame of traditional roles a woman has to play in the Indian society.

She can also be compared to Nilamani of “A Knock at the Door”. Just like Nilamani in her frenzy hugs the boy and suffocates him, Perundevi also hugs Geetha firmly not willing to leave her.

As though to prevent this one too from leaving her, the old arms tightened desperately around the young girl.
“What is it, Amma? Why are you hugging me so hard? It hurts!”
Perundevi loosened her embrace. The zest of a little while ago had evaporated, leaving her fatigued. (13)

Yamini the protagonist of the story is portrayed as a different personality who embraces solitude and darkness. Like Suseela in R.K Narayan’s *The English Teacher* she has her influence on her father even after her death.

“Like Daphne du Maurier’s immortal Rebeca, Yamini is dead before this story begins. But she is its central character, its raison dieter. In her passing away she may have attained the freedom she yearned, but those she left behind are forever in her thrall.” (Malini Seshadri: 4)

In spite of her dark complexion, she has a beauty that is unique. ‘She…..she was not mere darkness, she was night itself. A flame of night.’ (5)

Dark skinned though she was, she exuded loveliness like a luxuriant jungle scintillating with light. The curve of her eyebrows above the brilliant eyes, the moist lips like dew-drenched buds… the sheen of the skin, like a smooth sheet of water. Everything about her was fascinating, everything about her was beautiful. (29)

Like a breath of night, the small, graceful form emitted a glowing flame of dark rays. Shining like a crown were thick black curls. A smile spread over her face like a string of pearls spilling from an open jewel casket – and the round cheeks dimpled, forming hollows to catch that loveliness. (7)

As she grows up she detaches herself with the world. “As the baby became a little girl the inclination for close association with others was lost.”(8) Even at a tender age she eats by herself, bathes, combs and does everything herself. “At only seven years of age, she shook off the company of the servant and began to sleep alone in a separate room.”(8)

In her dislike for anklets, flowers in the hair, dressing up in different kinds of clothes she is extraordinary. Though she plays with her friends she hates the games in which children touch each other, huddle together and giggle. She is in a “level of complete self-sufficiency?” (9)

Physical closeness, cuddling-these she did not want. She backed away and fled from even the petting and the pampering little favours - which children usually are so fond of. (9)
But she has a separate fond for night. She loves darkness and declares it to her parents. “The night had found a natural echo in her. It strummed her as though she were a yaazh, and she gushed forth like music from its tenebrous fingers.” (10) As her father observes, “Her passion was reserved for the night, her romance was with solitude itself.” (29)

She is the one who can not digest the changes that are taking place in her body as she grows up. Her feelings on her attaining puberty are of disgust.

The sheer marvel of having become a real woman did not thrill her in the least. Instead, indistinct waves of emotion surged up and buffeted her. She quivered with outrage as though the world had invaded and planted its flag upon her unsullied, solitary inner domain. And she struggled to free herself. (11)

The only thing she understands is her repulsion for marriage. She hates the very word of marriage.

Mere mention of the word “marriage” provoked her essential being to surge up in revolt. This protest was like hunger, like sleep- a simple, not-to-be-derived instinct. (26)

Talking about the nature of Yamini, Prema Nandakumar says,

Half a century later, medical research has advanced so much that today the hysterical (and at time autistic) behaviour of Yamini could have been controlled, and she could have become a normal person, ready for marriage and motherhood. (World Literature Today)

There is a dilemma expressed in the novel regarding the character of Yamini. Saranathan has his own doubts.

He was amazed. It was a primeval, an inchoate urge. When the time came, it might ripen and even take shape as the great purpose of life! Perhaps it was this kind of growth that occurs at the very summit. If one searched the personalities of those who had given themselves to the whole world, maybe one would find this rare quality.

Naturally she saw marriage as narrow and restrictive and shunned it. That must be it. Or was it because she did not like to give herself, and did not like getting involved, unwilling to share. To take part in human emotional life showed a kind of miserliness. And her habit of wanting to be alone intensified her distaste for marriage and family life. Maybe she hated the male sex, maybe she had a distaste
for sex itself. Saaranathan wondered, “Is she what they call ‘undersexed’?” (29-30)

Vasantha Surya while discussing the question “Was Yamini unnatural?” says,

She reminds one of the figure of Samjna, wife of the sun god, Surya. Samjna cannot bear Surya’s rays and leaves him. Like Samjna whose name means – consciousness, Intellect, Awareness, Yamini is possessed by a self sufficient and inner awareness.

Would Yamini, if she had been left alone, have developed any emotional relationships later on, bonds that she would have willingly assumed? Perhaps, or perhaps not. Samjna leaves Surya, but he yearns for her and woos her back. If “Surya” is thought of as “Life in the Normal World”, such a spirit never wins Yamini over. (Introduction to Yamini)

Again Vasanthasurya talks about the point Chudamani Raghavan tries to drive home,

For Yamini existence is nothing but an awareness of the self in relation to the vast and mysterious cosmos, so much greater than the world of human society. Yamini’s dark inner universe scintillates with perceptions, and is mirrored by the dark night sky, radiant with stars both seen and unseen. (Introduction to Yamini)

Once while sharing her aspirations with her father, Yamini says,

“I’d like to go round and see the whole world, Appa! I want to find out about everything there in the universe – not just the moon, the planets, but all the other worlds too. Every nook and corner of this immense creation.” (29)

Vasantha Surya observes,

Her father senses this shrinking away from physicality and gives her the undemanding, quiet companionship which is acceptable to her. Her impulse to seek solitude is so great that it seems to interfere with natural urges for communication and companionship, sex and family life. (Introduction to Yamini)

Towards the end, Saranathan gives a statement that clearly shows the nature of Yamini.

Why does fire burn? Because that’s the very nature of fire, the essence of its being. There was nothing more to it than that! Fire cannot be cooled. If you want to cool it and pour water on it, it will not cool, it will just go out.

That’s what happened. The fire went out. (57)

Thus Chudamani Raghavan presents a totally different kind of woman beyond traditions and heterodoxies in Yamini who comes closer to Shankari in “Nangam Ashram”. At least, there is Professor to explain Shankari’s odd behaviour, but there is
none in the case of Yamini. They only assume. However through Yamini, Chudamani Raghavan explores the mystery of the human mind.

With unobtrusive ardour Chudamani explores the mystery of the human mind, and its essential solitariness. Every individual has a core, an inner life. She suggests that to violate this core of privacy is to set off a kind of cataclysm within the mind. And because of the nature of human relationship, that cataclysm will raise relentless echoes in the lives of others. (Introduction to Yamini)

Girls forced into marriage and being forced to go back to their husbands in spite of their unwillingness is a common phenomenon in Indian society. Yamini is forced into marriage, Gomathi is forced to go back to her husband. In both the cases, the iteration of the phrase, “I won’t do it, I won’t, I won’t!” (Yamini 26) “I won’t go” (Drought 51) clearly shows the helpless condition of women in Indian society where marriage and a place by her husband’s side is considered a safe, holy and respectable position.

She is an extra-ordinary girl for whom the repulsion for marriage is not the general repulsion for change of place or status and whose fears do not clear up after settling in the husband’s home and who does not become normal. She develops a kind of hysteria on the very sight of her husband and even goes mad when she has a baby. The thought of her motherhood makes her have the suicidal urge which fruits out after ten years.

“Unable to live in accordance with the dictates of her own nature, she had secretly pronounced a death sentence on herself and was bent on carrying it out. For her, living had become a prison.” (45)

In Indian we have two kinds of women. One is a conventional woman who easily fits herself into the traditionally ordained roles of a mother, wife and daughter-in-law. The other kind of women is unconventional women who can not be bound by such roles. They outgrow all the bonds and try to be out of the ordinary. But the commonly accepted phenomenon in our Indian fiction is that these kind of unconventional women suffer and embrace death as the only solace.

“The unconventional are seen to suffer for their violation of accepted norms of society or for questioning them - death is the way out for them, unless their experience teaches them to subdue their individuality and rebelliousness and realize the wisdom of the traditional ways.” (Bala Kothandaraman)
This has been delineated by Chudamani Raghavan in her stories, “The Fourth Ashram” and \textit{Yamini}. Both Shankari of “The Fourth Ashram” and Yamini embrace death as the ultimate refuge. It can also be viewed from a different angle as her father thinks, “When life cheats you, you cannot fill that void with the world’s alms, its paltry satisfactions. Only death can compensate for life.” (59)

She is a girl who finds her solace in solitude and appears to her father as the living embodiment of the word “solitude”.

It seemed to him that she was the living embodiment of the word “solitude”. So far as he knew she had no close friends. All continued themselves within the boundary of acquaintance….. She seemed to care nothing for companionship or closeness. (29)

Because of this love for liberty she asks her father to set her free when her father asks her forgiveness.

It darted out of her, like lightning streaking across the face of the night, visible and distinct.

“Set me free. I’ll forgive you.” (58).

He lets her act according to her wishes and she commits suicide and quenches the urge within her for liberty from the shackles of life,

Geetha, Yamini’s daughter is in full contrast to her mother. As the day is born out of the night, she though born of Yamini has none of her traits. She is the embodiment of all the worldly qualities which Perundevi had longed for in Yamini. She is of the fair complexion unlike Yamini:

But this one was radiantly fair! Everything about her was bright… Her skin was very fair, with a tinge of rose. Looking at her made you think of milk, of the full moon, or of lilies…. Like the moon blossoming in the field of night, like the day being born from night’s womb, Geetha emerged from Yamini. (20)

She evens hates darkness and puts on the light as soon as it gets dark. “In nothing did she resemble the other one. As soon as it was dusk Geetha would switch on the lights in each room of the house. She disliked the dark.” (14) In contrast to her mother, she likes cuddling and caressing. The moment she returns from her pilgrimage, “Brimming over with eagerness, she called out “Amma! As soon as she came in, rushed up and hugged her tight,” (11)
She loves all kinds of decoration, decking herself with flowers and all to show that her feet are attached to the earthly desires.

She is affectionate to Vasanthi, her step-mother and her two sons Mahesh and Ramesh. She jokes with Vasanthi and her father as she would to a friend.

Geetha stuck out her tongue and made a playful face, “Why should I butter you up? What do I want from you? It’s only poor chithi! Looks like she’d really like to go on a holiday! Why don’t you take her, Appa? Leave Mahesh and Ramesh here and go off on a second honeymoon, just the two of you!” (17).

Like her mother Yamini, she doesn’t repulse against marriage. On the contrary she has loved a boy out of their caste and gets the consent of her parents for marriage. To some extent she is reticent and hence has kept her love affair a secret. This leads to the nervousness of her grandmother Perundevi. Her interests in God are not the interest Meera or any other saint had. She seeks the help of God in making her love a success. Even her pilgrimage to Badri has been because her lover was on his trip to Badri to keep company to his mother. She has stayed in the pilgrimage for a long time only to keep him company. With out saying all these she tells her grandmother she is staying back as she is awful about the sadhus over there. It is the reason for Perundevi’s grief and fear. She is bold to fall in love and to declare her love to her parents and get their consent.

When Rameshan insists that Geetha should come out with her feelings regarding her marriage, she blurs it out at once.

Struggling bit by bit through an account of what was sure to be considered a controversial experience would only drag out her suspense. It would be much better to spill it all out at once. … There was no time to pick and choose the words and arrange them neatly. And so, as soon as she had begun to say what was at the centre to secret mind, it all came out in a single breath.

“All I am in love with someone,” she said. … All of a sudden it seemed to her that she had been outrageously bold and shameless. (62-63)

Rameshan and Vasanthi are the minor characters in the story. Much is not spoken of these characters though Rameshan is Yamini’s husband.

Much is not said of Vasanthi, Rameshan’s second wife. But she has been portrayed as a loving mother and affectionate daughter to Geetha and Perundevi respectively. In the words of the author, ”Vasanthi too was a generous sort of person who could love her.” (16) She accepts her husband’s former mother-in-law as her Aunt and
call her “Athai”. (18) Similarly she accepts Geetha as her daughter and converses freely with both Perundevi and Geetha.

Vasanthi would look at her vegetable patch, talk about the price of brinjals, worriedly seek advice on children’s illness. She would tell her all about a paly she had seen with her husband, or recount how she had exchanged two pairs of old trousers and three old sarees( two of them with jari borders) for a stainless steel container with a lid, plus a spoon. (18)

Her intimacy with Geetha is so much that Geetha even teases her and takes her side.

“It’s only poor Chithi! Looks like she’d really like to go on a holiday! Why don’t you take her, Appa? Leave Mahesh and Ramesh here and go off on a second honeymoon, just the two of you!” (17)

Thus Chudamani Raghavan brings a kaleidoscopic variety of human characters through her stories. She adeptly makes her message reach the reader. Even her titles are indicative of the themes, with a dignity of style and diction. Except a few stories like “My Daughter Shobana” the author has used third person narration and in particular omniscient point view in narrating the story. Some of her stories like “Counting the Flowers” and “Drought” are open ended stories. The author does not portray men alone or the women alone as culprits. It may be either of them or both based on the situation. Due to her portrayal of day-to-day life she has occupied a citadel of short story in spite of being a major low profile short-story writer.

Thus we can find that all her stories have been dealt with the feministic perspective though it is not her main concern. The problems of dowry, women’s psychology, domestic chores thrusting the women, gender discrimination in the name of social norms, breakaway from the traditional norms, poverty and drought making human beings inhuman, women being thrust into marriage against their wishes, concept of sisterhood are the themes of her stories. Her characters do not rebel against the situation but accept it as it comes. At the same time they have their own outlook of life. Though some of women like Prema of “Sisterhood” and Muktha of “The Strands of the Void” are conventional, they too are assertive in their own way. “Within the constraints of economic needs and family loyalties, she allows her women characters almost to a utopian degree, the freedom to make moral choices.” (Holmstorm, 56)