CHAPTER - V

MAITREYI PUSHPA

Idannamam
Chaak
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Idannamam¹

Maitreyi Pushpa is a representative contemporary Hindi writer whose fiction critiques the peculiar position of the Indian rural woman. "From the point of view of women's writing in Hindi, she is an important novelist as she extends and enriches a strand of women's writing that moves beyond the genteel tradition of urban lives, and of overtly westernized alienated women."² As a novelist she carries forward the glorious tradition of women writers like Ismat Chugtai, Amrita Pritam, Krishna Sobti and Manu Bhandari, who have focused their writing on woman's predicament in the larger perspective of a changing society. She deserves credit for upholding and promoting the tradition of rural novel in Hindi in a manner reminiscent of Prem Chand's Godan and Phanishiwar Nath Renu's Maila Aanchal. Her meteoric emergence on the literary firmament in the last decade of the twentieth century marks a crucial moment in the growth and application of feminist ideology in Hindi literature. From her works one could construct the feminist politics. She succeeds in pushing the limits of feminist struggle to the point where "woman wants to challenge the commodification of her body and expose the abhorrent hypocrisies of a society that lives between tradition and modernity, using the exploitative potential of both concepts against her."³

Long ago in the sixties Krishna Sobti's Mirto Marjani (1967) raised a storm in the placid waters of Hindi literature for never before had a common housewife, a daughter-in-law, in fact, appeared in such a bold
posture within the four-walls of a traditional Indian family. Mitro's extraordinary boldness could be attributed to the fact that even though there was dearth of women's portrayals in Hindi fiction, there had been few women who carried on their struggles within a rigid family hierarchy, with little or no knowledge of feminist agendas, progressive ideas or intellectual aspirations. And this is precisely what happens with the female protagonists of Maitreyi Pushpa also. They express their identity, sexuality and manifest their power at crucial stages of their lives. These otherwise commonplace women are caught in uncommon either/or situations. They are forced to take significant decisions. In a way they resemble the mythological Indian women characters of the past, reclaiming their place within the family, the community and the society through an unswerving commitment to their own instinctive judgments, through an assertion of their rights and often through a re-interpretation of the 'ambiguous' Indian attitude towards woman.¹

Mandakini, the female protagonist of Idannamam (This is Not for Me), is only ten years old when she is forced to flee her village Sonpura, situated in the Vindhyachal hills. She has to take refuge, along with her grandmother, with distant relatives in a distant village named Shyamali. Her father has been the village Pradhan, working hard to build a government hospital in the village. But he is brutally murdered just before the inauguration of the hospital. Her mother re-marries and is then used by her politician husband Ratan Yadav, to fight a prolonged legal battle for the custody of the young daughter who is the sole legal heir to the agricultural
property; disillusioned, when she shows resistance, Ratan Yadav finds no use for her and gives her to a maternal cousin where she lives a life of disgrace.

Mandakini, popularly known as Manda, yearning for her village and constantly on the run at the same time, suffers the stigma of an abandoned child, the child of a disgraced mother who could neither keep alive the family traditions nor the memory of her dead husband. Forced to adjudicate between social judgements and personal ties, Manda manages to reassess her own worth and her mother's predicament. Against all odds she returns to her native village Sonpura and finds solace in the companionship of her childhood friend Sugna, who herself is exploited by her drunken father and his friend Abhilakh, the corrupt contractor and womaniser of Sonpura. Left without much land Manda earns her livelihood by reciting from the *Ramayana* and *Bhagwad* in the neighbouring villages. She also manages to collect some money from poor farmers and with the Pradhan's help, forms a co-operative society through which she buys a tractor to obtain a loading contract at the village quarries and in this way ensures some compensation for the dispossessed villagers.

Equally attached to Bau, her grandmother and Prem, her mother, Manda learns early in life to accept the burden of understanding both. Bau can only curse the daughter-in-law who had cared little for the name and reputation of the family, the feelings of her daughter and the *dharma* or *maryada* of a widow. Herself widowed at a very young age, for long years Bau has lived never ever thinking of another life with another man. Never
ever abandoning her home and hearth she has strictly followed the 'law of the threshold'. Traumatized as a child by the flight from one place to another, Manda tears herself in sorrow and self-pity. But as she reaches adolescence, she accepts her mother's need to marry and while listening to the curses of her grandmother she feels the need to patch up with her mother. Straddling between two worlds and appreciating the perspectives of both, Manda grows in maturity taking her decisions and accepting responsibility early in her life. Coming back to the village, Manda finds both her home and the village in shambles. The farmers have lost their land to the quarrying contractors and poverty is rife as the villagers lose the means of their livelihood.

Raped by a relative during her adolescence, and cheated out of property by another, Manda is given an agenda by a social worker turned Swami who persuades her to organize the villagers and demand adequate compensation for their land acquired by Abhilakh and other quarry contractors. Manda reclaims her dead father's role for which she is threatened, beaten and terrorized by Abhilakh and his political cohorts. The police, a symbol of corrupt authority in all of Maitreyi Pushpa's novels, humiliate her and bring false cases against her. Manda, supported by the Pradhan and the village elders stands precariously on a difficult road.

Both these novels selected for this study, i.e., *Idannamam* (1994) and *Chāāk* (1997), are woman centered texts. The author is deeply committed to the cause of women and like a crusader takes up women's issues invariably in all of her novels, short stories and articles. In *Idannamam* and elsewhere in
The novels Chaak (1997), Almakabootari (2002) and Jhoola Nat (1999), the novelist portrays marginalized women who are oppressed, ostracized, abandoned or deprived. The stories of these women trace the process of their growth from victims to survivors and thereafter into strong and tenacious rebels who question and sometimes reject the authority of a system bound by unfair patriarchal norms and values. The protagonists symbolically gather up all their woes and turn their suffering into strength. While facing their tragic predicament they champion the cause of their sisters and move inevitably into a political arena to assert themselves and act on behalf of uninformed, illiterate and oppressed masses of people.

Manda, the female protagonist of Idannamam and Sarang, her counterpart in Chaak and even Alma in Almakabootari follow a similar paradigm. Quintessentially, Manda and Sarang are made of the same stuff, the difference being in their positionality in the patriarchal hierarchy and the situations arising thereof. Mandakini is a young, unmarried village girl; Sarang is a married woman, a daughter-in-law, a wife and a mother and therefore, expected to perform more than one gender roles.

Dr. Nirmala Jain sees the strength of this novel in its women characters and language. Apart from the major women characters, other minor characters fill in the gaps and create a complete image of woman who is a strange blend of meekness and courage. Maitreyi Pushpa's women in Idannamam – Prem, Kusuma and Sugana – blend the two opposite faces of woman, one as meek as a lamb and the other as ferocious and violent as a tigress and vindicate the myth that woman is a mystery which eludes
definition. These women highlight the unpalatable truth that making a bold and courageous choice of an alternative other than the socially prescribed gender role, ultimately proves to be tragic and disastrous. In a way it is a hopeless situation for a woman that offers no choice at all. "What impresses most in these female characters is that in situations of forbearance or resistance their responses are happily free from artificially complicated intellectual confusion. Their entire behaviour is propelled by instinct and spontaneous impulse." Maitreyi Pushpa deserves applause for sparing her characters the painful burden of the cerebral complexity found in some of her high-brow contemporaries.

Manda, the twenty three year old female protagonist stays unmarried and is labelled morally loose, Prem, her mother refused to live a widow's life, she is condemned to live as a social exile, Kusuma bhabhi, rejected and humiliated as a wife dares quench her thirst for love and motherhood, is stigmatized and threatened. Sugana defies the evil intentions of her father and his Satanic accomplice by killing him and getting killed in turn. But all these women, who share a common legacy of pain and deprivation strike back at the most opportune moment and upset the forces of oppression and suppression which thrive on their vulnerability.

In a feudalistic patriarchy a woman tries to find security and protection in the family by living as a mother, wife, sister, daughter or even as a mistress in order to save her self and her "honour" from violence and exploitation by forces outside the family. In the absence of a male patriarch symbolizing power and protection, a woman feels unprotected and helpless
and, therefore, tries to seek protection from another patriarch out of the family. To buy herself this protection and security she has to barter away her body and sometimes her property also, if she had any. There is no escape from sexual and economic exploitation which is offered to her in lieu of this 'protection'.

*Idannamam* abounds in the images of such helpless rural, illiterate women who though aware of the violent contradictions and double standards operating in a feudalistic society, yet attempt to search new possibilities in the changing times. Almost every major woman character of this text raises questions against the morality and ethicality of gender roles ordained by a male-dominated system. Humiliated and persecuted at every step, she still tries to break into the stronghold of tradition which has become a stranglehold for her; and ventures to step into an unchartered, unknown region beset with dangers. She refuses to accept defeat, compromise or submit to the male authority. She tries to consolidate support and strength to fight her own battle to get back those rights that have been denied to her as a human being.

It is observed in the *Mahabharata* that "to be without a proper protector is a great calamity for the fair sex in this world, which is full of wickedness." With the death of a patriarch — the head of the family, his mother, wife and daughter find themselves absolutely helpless and insecure. When Mahendra Singh, the patriarch in the family dies, Bau, Prem and Manda — all the three women in the family face this situation and life takes a violent turn, for, as soon as Mahendra dies, people "pounce upon like
vultures," (17) on Prem, the young widow. In the Indian society, more so in a rural and feudal society, it has been ordained that the father ought to protect a woman while she is a maiden, the husband when she is married, and the sons when the husband is no more; a woman ought not to remain independent. Yajñavalkya also enunciates the doctrine of dependence of women, but with him it is a natural corollary of the life long protection that has to be offered to them.

Threatened with the prospect of an insecure future, Prem is scared to spend a widow's life. Her mother-in-law, who too was a widow, had her son to depend on. But Prem has none to protect her. Therefore, she dreams of a secure and safe future with Ratan Yadav, her brother-in-law. An alliance with a sister's husband is considered immoral, objectionable and shameful. An alliance with husband's brother on the contrary easily gets the sanction of the society because it is a convenient arrangement that keeps family property within the family; only the owner changes. A widow can be a prostitute, a nun, or a Sati but she cannot be allowed to take another man. For instance, a city-bred woman like Vasudha, heroine of Raji Seth's novel Tatsam, inspite of being a widow can think of a choice between two men 'Anand' and 'Vivek' and can marry Anand; but in a rural society where Prem lives, she cannot exercise any of the choices. In a feudalistic rural society, it is sinful for a widow to seek joy and happiness for herself. She is just a commodity to be used by man; and, therefore, his property. The mother-in-law, Bau, doesn't forgive Prem, her daughter-in-law, this heinous sin and she rues the absence of some male member in the family who could
punish Prem. Had there been a man in the family, "he could have cut her into pieces and thrown away." (28-29)

Pressurized by Ratan Yadav, Prem files a suit to get the custody of her minor daughter Manda. Bau, already old and bereaved, finds it difficult to protect Manda. She feels insecure to live in her village with enemies around. Consequently, she leaves the village quietly and takes shelter in a distant village with a distant relative. Entangled in court cases of family feuds, land and property, the ill-fated women are forced to take help of men in these matters. While searching for protection and security, they are betrayed and cheated by men who in the guise of their well-wishers, rob them of whatever they have – land, property and last but not the least, their female body.

Kusuma, the young daughter-in-law in the household of Shyamali's Zamindar Pancham Singh where Bau and Manda are given shelter, is married to Yashpal. But since she couldn't bring sufficient dowry, he marries another girl while Kusuma lives in humiliation – rejected and forsaken. She is also insecure and tries to find emotional and physical security in Amar Singh, the bachelor younger brother of her father-in-law, who is a patient of tuberculosis. She bears a child from him, who is otherwise her father-in-law and faces the stigma of an illegitimate relationship.

In Manda's native village Sonpura, her childhood friend Sugna's father Jagesar, the drunkard, is a weak and disabled man who cannot provide security to his wife and daughter. Abhilakh, his corrupt cohort succeeds in his evil designs and exploits Sugna sexually. Kailash, who is
related to Manda as an uncle, takes advantage of her vulnerable situation to rape her. Lila lives as a mistress with Abhilakh, the womaniser, and Tulasi is mistress to the ailing Ganeshi, Ahilaya, the daughter of Tulasi and Babban, the niece of Chief Sahib are compelled by circumstances to succumb to prostitution.

The details of the unhappy and miserable lives of these women portray an image of a highly vulnerable, insecure woman, who is compelled to seek protection of a man or a patriarch and in turn is cheated and betrayed. Her vulnerability is the cause of her exploitation.

Prior to Idannamam, Maitreyi Pushpa in her earlier novel Betwa Behati Rahi (1993) too has focused on the eternal suffering of a woman. Whereas Betwa Behati Rahi depicts woman as a victim of a patriarchal society, Idannamam goes ahead of it and portrays her as a survivor. The protagonist herein doesn't accept her predicament like a dumb-doll. Instead of compromising as a meek sufferer, she musters up strength and strikes against her adversary. It is true that her struggle is not easy but she doesn't give in easily. The women in Idannamam, namely Manda, Kusuma, Sugna and even Prem – are the manifestations of and embodiment of woman as Shakti – and no tyrant is able to crush them.

Surprisingly the author had dedicated this narrative of women's struggle to Dādā (Pancham Singh) and Kakko – his wife. Pancham Singh is the symbol of patriarchal authority and Kakko is a staunch supporter of the same. Kakko rather than being an individual, represents a particular class and her character is typically a class character. She is one of those women
who benefit from patriarchy because it gives them a status and certain rights and privileges attached therewith. As Kamala Bhasin has remarked:

The appropriate way to describe male control over woman is 'paternalistic dominance'. There is dominance but it is paternalistic because women are provided shelter, food and security vis-à-vis outsiders. Paternalistic dominance has oppressive aspects, but it also involves a set of mutual obligations and is frequently not perceived as oppressive. This is what makes it difficult to recognize and fight.10

Kakko belongs to the class of rural bourgeois. As Engels has noted, an important trait of the woman of this class is that she does not work outside the family, she is totally dependent on her husband, she is property herself. Kakko is a woman who is traditional to the core and her notions about the role of a wife, the Grihalakshami, are nurtured by the pativrata image. She is completely dedicated to her husband, who is her lord and master. She worships him as God – pati-parmeshwar' and his word is law unto her. To serve him with utmost honesty and devotion is her only dharma. She overlooks all the lapses in her husband and supports him in all his decisions even at the cost of her personal interests. She executes her husband's powers who is the head of the family in running the household and being the senior-most lady she is obeyed by the junior ones. Her husband takes her counsel in all important matters. Despite being an ideal wife and a role model of wifely behaviour for other women in the family, Kakko's husband Pancham Singh has more than one mistresses. Male promiscuity gets a tacit sanction in a feudalistic patriarchal society. When
his liaison with Gaura becomes public, the women in the family dare not comment on his face, but they don't spare Kakko and make her the target of their biting taunts. One of the sisters-in-law says, "Jiji (elder sister or sister-in-law), what stuff are you made of? Any other woman in your place would have raged a war" (20). Before Gaura, dâdâ had kept another mistress who was a low-caste washer-woman and had maneuvered Pancham Singh to gift her four 'bighas' of land to her in lieu of her sexual favours to him. The women of the house are critical of dâdâ's conduct and give a bit of their mind to her: "wasn't the washer-woman enough? . . . The 'dhobin' has already grabbed four 'bighas', let's see how much Gaura succeeds in getting." (20) The other one calls 'dâdâ' a 'Kisan-Kanhai', even in his old age he loses control on seeing a beautiful face.

Overlooking her personal feelings of jealousy and grief on losing her husband to other women; Kakko shields him against the affront: "You didn't hesitate to say things proper or improper. You didn't observe any courtesy due to your elder bother-in-law. But how can I part company with my husband? After all, he hasn't overlooked my interests. . . . how does it matter if he brought that woman home? She must be unhappy and needy. Man cannot resist the charms of a woman and Gaura being so beautiful, he must have lost his heart to her." (21.) Kakko not only protects her husband, she also finds a justification and goes a step further to take pride in him for being a messiah for the hapless woman: "What suffering Gaura had to face! Her effeminate husband couldn't protect her, otherwise no woman would leave her home because of her beauty the village ruffians would not leave
her in peace . . . and look at the people! None would open his mouth against such hooliganism as if only eunuchs lived in the village" (21)

What makes Kakko worthy of the place of honour she occupies in the family, apart from her genuine love and devotion to her husband, is her natural warmth and understanding of human predicament. She has some hidden resources of strength in her. Inspite of her unflinching faith in the age-old traditions, her unconditional sympathy for others saves her from rigidity. She shows a remarkable understanding of human nature and supports the cause of justice without trepidation. Without intending any defiance to the authority, she takes the side of the unhappy and the deprived and wields her influence on her husband to help them. Within the congested and closed space of the haveli, she symbolically creates a sufficiently wider space for herself to grow out of her limited sphere and reaches out to all who need her. She gives an unexpected reply to her sister-in-law: "Don't worry, younger sister, whatever land or property dâdâ would give to Gaura, it would be given out of his own share. I won't allow him to take anything out of your portion. If I have married a 'jogi', I must become a 'jogin' myself." (21) She absolves her husband of all blame and emphatically indicates that her destiny as a wife is inextricably linked with her husband.

Kakoo has sympathy for Prem, the disgraced mother of Manda and can understand her situation as a woman and as a mother. Pleading for her she says to her husband, "you should understand that protection and security demand a heavy price. Whether the public gets it from the king or a woman from a man – it doesn't make any difference. In either case it makes
you a slave and slavery entails torture and oppression . . . who knows what price Prem had to pay and what pain she had to bear." (109)

Kakko saves Kusuma from her husband’s violent attack when the entire family threatens and intimidates her on the issue of the legitimacy of the child she is carrying in her womb. They want the baby aborted while Kusuma refuses to do so. Kakko once again comes to the rescue of the woman and the mother and under the pretext of taking her to a doctor she arranged to send her to her brother’s house. She consoles her saying, "daughter, think that you are going into exile like Sitaji. Even here in this house you have no happiness and joy." (124).

Self-sacrificing and self-effacing women like Kakko are becoming a rare phenomenon even in the modern-day Indian society. The generation of such women who found the purpose of their life in upholding the pativrata ideal, is fast receding into a back-stage position. Arvind Jain comments in this context:

"Women who appear to be secure and respectable as ideal wives (dādā’s wife Kakko, wives of Govind Singh, Yashpal and Vikram), will perhaps remain so till they comply with the desires and obey the orders of their husbands and masters meekly and till they do not protest against their unethical, illegitimate and depraved behaviour."13

Kakko, as an ideal 'pativrata' wife, instead of revolting against patriarchy, promotes and strengthens it.
"Idannamam" focuses mainly on three women – Bau, Prem and Manda. Through these three women, the author has created a woman-centred narrative encompassing three generations. All three of them live their individual lives pursuing their individual aspirations. Their lives run parallel to each other whereas at times they tend to intersect since they are very closely related. Bau, the grandmother of Manda, represents the same old generation to which Kakko belongs. She staunchly believes in traditional values and tries to find the meaning and purpose of life in the values that she has inherited as a legacy. Bau lives in her own close, narrow world – a world on the verge of extinction. This is also a complex world with its own set of values and beliefs.

Bau belongs to that generation of women whose only concern is the well-being of their family. The summum-bonum of their life happens to be the family – they live and die for it. Bau, the old matriarch, is like seasoned timber that has seen rough weather. She has performed all masculine duties after her husband's death and brought up her son Mahendra with utmost care and concern. Her son's murder once again shatters her lonely world. Once again the responsibilities of the family fall upon her tired shoulders, since there is no male member to wear the mantle of paterfamilias. She performs her role bravely, but then the daughter-in-law gives her the severest blow by eloping with Ratan Yadav. Bau cannot tolerate this disgrace of the family and hates Prem all through her life.

Bau is the image of a traditional woman of the bygone generation who derives her power from her strict adherence to traditions and norms –
which become sacrosanct for her and she sticks to them as her 'dharma'. Traditions relate to *maryada* or *dharma* which must be saved even at the cost of one's life.

Manda, the chief protagonist seems to have inherited her steadfastness and tenacity from Bau, her grandmother. Throwing aside a momentary feeling of self-pity, Bau resolves: "As long as there is life in my body, I'll fight my battle. I have fought my battle throughout my life. It's not a joke to be a Zamindarin, to maintain the status and honour, . . . I have lived honourably. None should think that I can be scared and forced to hand over Manda to that slut." (75) Inspite of her unyielding courage in the face of adversities, Bau is sometimes overtaken by fears and insecurity natural to a woman wandering like a nomad to evade the police and taking shelter with people only distantly related to her. Her anguish is reflected in her words, "we are like birds driven out of our nests. Who will kill us where and when . . . we don't know." (84) Manda becomes her Achilles' heel, a cause of her constant anxiety, "none knows, Manda, who gets your custody when the case is over?" (85).

Insulted and humiliated Bau is out of her wits because of countless compromises she is expected to make; and her living like a parasite causes her tremendous pain. People comment at her back: "this inauspicious old woman! whereever she goes, she carries bad luck and spreads ruin." (125) Bau doesn't accept defeat easily and changes her strategies according to the situation. Manda wonders at her exceptional adaptability: "Bau, how many weapons do you have? You use them on yourself only . . . without any
hesitation you cut yourself into pieces." (138) But inspite of her toughness of body and mind, Bau cannot match men in their cunning. Apparently vigilant and resourceful she is deceived by Vily Gobind Singh who robs her off her land – the mainstay of her life. On coming back to her village, she is horrified to find that her land has been fraudulently sold and she has virtually nothing and none to fall back upon. Men take advantage of her helplessness and those who offer help as benefactors betray her trust. Even Pancham Singh who generously offers help to her fails to vouchsafe her security because a vulnerable widow, burdened with a young girl's guardianship becomes an easy victim to avaricious men like Gobind Singh.

Ignorance and lack of education renders women incompetent in handling their affairs and force them to depend on men for help. Dependence makes them vulnerable and leads to their exploitation. Bau's situation is similar to that of Saru Gosainee of Indira Goswami's Saga of South Kamrup, who, inspite of her various accomplishments is cheated and robbed by a man whom she entrusts with the management of her land because she herself is illiterate. This image of a rural, illiterate, ignorant woman betrayed by men is quite common in contemporary women's writing.

It is true about women that they are more traditional than men and follow and nurture traditions with deeper faith and vigour. But this is also equally true that women are more pliant and they accept change more readily than men. Bau has an unflinching faith in traditional values. For her marriage is the ultimate destination of a woman's life. Her only dream about
Manda's future is that she is married and settles down in a life of domesticity, "somehow or other, Manda must get married, this is the most cherished dream of Bau. This is the only desire left in her life. Any feeble hope makes her follow the mirage like a deer." (352) When Tikam Singh, the Swami visits their home, the only blessing Bau seeks for Manda and Sugna – the unmarried girls is: "Maharaj! bless our girls that they get good husbands and good in-laws (homes)." (181) Against her plans about Manda's marriage, Bau understands Manda's mission and respects her or her dedication to a noble cause. She withstands social pressure and taunts of men like Jagesar who never misses a chance to hurt her on the issue of Manda's marriage. One of the most sacred duties of parents towards daughters is to marry them off properly. It is considered a sin if a young daughter is allowed to stay unmarried; and, therefore, becomes all the more reason for social condemnation. It indicates a progressive streak in Bau that she doesn't compel Manda to get married and doesn't impose her decision on her. Moreover, quite contrary to her rigid stand on 'maryada' or 'norms', she allows Manda her space and doesn't restrict her movements. Though chagrined on having to depend on Manda's earnings by reciting Ramayana and Bhagwat, she doesn't stop her from this activity which doesn't behove a girl, and more so, an Ahir, Yadav girl. This adaptability and flexibility is the strength of a woman and her gender.

However, Bau's attitude towards Prem, her daughter-in-law is consistently stereotyped. Manda knows that "Bau's attitude towards Prem will remain rigid like an iron rod. She can't be expected to bend." (125) She
turns down Manda's pleadings to forgive her mother. She doesn't soften and refuses to relent: "If you want to lodge your mother in this house, I'll leave it at once. Even my shadow will not touch it again ... I'll jump into Betwa and put an end to my life." (266) Contrary to her attitude towards Prem, is her sympathy for Kusuma – the daughter-in-law of Gobind Singh, who is also accused of moral breach. This contradiction in her behaviour could be interpreted as Bau's response as woman towards another woman vis-à-vis a mother-in-law's behaviour towards a daughter-in-law. She is a conventional, stereotyped mother-in-law whose lack of sympathy for the daughter-in-law is typical to her specified gender role. While judging Prem, she has before her the traditional image of a woman to which Prem doesn't subscribe. Bau, because of her biases, can't view her as a human being and, therefore, she is adamant to punish her for violating the sacred image of a woman.

According to Nirmala Jain, the context of Prem's situation reflects the difference in the attitudes of three different generations at a common point of time. For Bau, Prem has committed a crime and her crime is unpardonable. For Prem, her act is an inevitability of life but with a sense of guilt; whereas for Manda the issue is human rather than moral.

Prem presents the image of a woman for whom traditions are not sacrosanct. She is the second generation woman and her world is different from that of the mother-in-law. Bau finds traditions vibrant and alive and capable of giving a purpose and direction to her life. She is proud of this inheritance, draws strength and sustenance from it and guards it fanatically. She wants that the younger generation should also carry the torch of these
time-tested traditions and maintain the old order. In a way she tries to strengthen patriarchy and uphold male hierarchy. Prem, on the other hand, doesn't receive any strength or sustenance from traditions. For her they have lost meaning and are bound to become mere shackles to curb individual freedom. For Bau, family comes prior to the individual, and she has scarificed her personal needs for the interests of her family with a sense of pride. Coming from a feudal background, family "honour" is of paramount importance to her and it cannot be compromised. Prem enjoys the benefits that the family gives, but doesn't agree to make sacrifices for it. As a mother also she fails in her duty towards Manda, her young daughter, whom she leaves back to elope with Ratan Yadav in search of greener pastures. Bau on the other hand lives a long, lonely widow's life to bring up her son Mahendra. She tells Manda, "Binnu, those were the days when it was customary for women to commit 'Sati'. According to the custom I'd also have become 'Sati' but Mahendra's young age prevented me. Our scriptures also ordain that a woman with a baby is a mother first, her duty as wife unto the husband comes later . . . moreover, I was bound to my duty towards my father-in-law and my husband, i.e. to raise his family's heir. So, dear daughter, I burnt the desires of my youth and bodily appetites in the Homkund of this threshold." (268) Bau emerges as a strong character representing the traditional "woman of substance" and inspires admiration. Prem is an ordinary woman who exhibits momentary courage in crossing the threshold and asserting her will to live her own life. But she doesn't achieve anything great except satisfying her unbridled urges. Even in this act
of defiance, she doesn't show any strength of conviction or sanity of judgment. Very soon she is disillusioned, betrayed and doomed to a life of misery. She repents for her decision and lives a shadowy existence scarred with corroding feelings of self-reproach and guilt. She truly atones for her misdeeds by confessing before Manda whom she had wronged as a child, and relieves her burdened soul by that commendable act of giving her entire savings to Manda when she needed money for a public cause.

Prem's daring act of taking the case against Bau back, and foiling Ratan Yadav's intentions of robbing Manda of her share of land redeems her image as a mother to some extent. But by and large she remains a woman who arouses pity and deserves sympathy as a human being. In her the author has presented a negative image of woman implying that unless a woman is adequately equipped for living a better and more purposeful life, it can prove foolish and fatal to leave those footholds which are definitely stronger and surer.

Prem's negativity can also be interpreted in terms of her self-seeking nature and neglecting 'duty' to follow a path of self-indulgence. She refuses to suppress the primeval desires of body as Bau has done. She believes in their expression rather than repression. In her portrayal, the author raises the problematising issue of woman's sexuality. Prem signifies the importance of irrepressible sex urge in human life. Lured by a promised life of physical pleasures, she leaves her home and her daughter after her husband's death. Even before leaving home, her conduct is not in keeping with the demands of a widow's life in respectable families. Women talk about her loose
character: "In reality, she is wayward, unable to control her youth and passions; that is why she couldn't live without a male." (14)

Prem represents the class of women in rural set-up who assert and subsequently realize their sexuality. But the author's attitude towards the class of such women is traditional. The fact that Prem in the end is left cheated and disillusioned clearly denotes the author's point of view.

Bau too receives her share of blame for not understanding Prem and her physical needs. Judging the young woman's situation with her own obsolete standards, she fails to empathize with Prem. "She was all alone caught and torn in the thorny bushes of desires . . . chasing shadows." (27) Lechers and wags like Jagesar seek vicarious pleasure in talking about the young widow: "I swear by you, Bau, Prem Bhabhi used to ask Chameli for contraceptive pills so that she may not conceive. . . . Prem bhabhi has a fickle mind and wanton eyes. But she is also aggrieved because of Mahendra's death, that is why she used to cry on Ram Rattan's shoulders." (27) Bau believed that more than Prem's youth, property was the lure for lecherous, cunning men. She regrets Mahendra's foolishness: "I had warned my son many a time that woman and property form a fatal conjunct. It invites doom. Keep the land in your name . . . but he was blind in Prem's love . . . her beauty had blind folded his eyes." (27) She laments that her son was an innocent boy who could not see through the evil in the character of this clever woman who speaks her lover's language like a "caged parrot."

The question of physical appetites has been raised in the context of all these three women — Bau, Prem and Manda. Bau also faced it but her
times were different. She decided to suppress her bodily desires and received social admiration and respect in turn. Prem went to the other extreme of satisfying her desires and was subjected to social blame, insult and boycott. Manda's situation is different because she is an unmarried girl. She also acknowledges the need to fulfil physical desires but doesn't cross the social limits and respects ethical norms. Inspite of her deep love for Makrand she overcomes her passions and sublimes them into a source of spiritual energy which she requires for a higher cause. Their mutually contradictory choices impart two different social images to Bau and Prem – the former, a pativrata or sati wins acclaim, and the latter, a wanton woman, a kulta or patita – a fallen woman invites social reproach and condemnation. Manda, the youngest of them who belongs to the third generation understands both of them, and exercising her own personal choice about this issue of vital importance, doesn't disapprove of the irresistibility of physical drives. However, she doesn't approve of the course her mother had taken to satisfy it.

Maitreyi Pushpa doesn't approve of the unbridled fulfilment of animal passions. Such behaviour is held irresponsible and leads to a tragic end. Prem's life validates this opinion. As a social being, every human being is expected to view his behaviour from a larger social perspective to which he owes allegiance. Prem also attains this awareness when she looks at her life vis-à-vis Manda's life. There takes place a sort of reversal of their roles when she asks Manda to forgive her: "Forgive me, my child . . . forgive your mother." (114) She has paid a great price to reach this moment of
realization. Her pain and suffering have purged her and she has acquired a clarity of vision. She tells Manda who is no longer her long lost daughter but her mentor, her friend and philosopher: "The light of your eyes is reflecting in my eyes too. My mind is enlightened. You are older and maturer. It's not years that count. What is of real significance is wisdom and discretion, sacrifice for others. Only that leads to light and removes darkness. Only such an enlightened person becomes a real human being." (346) She confesses before Manda: "I have made countless mistakes and debased my life . . . To fulfil desires. I adopted a wayward course and lived a life of dogs. I became worse than an animal and wasted this precious human life." (346) Repentance and self-chastisement redeem Prem and she realizes: "Had I awakened to this realization before, I would have understood that this life is not lived on a physical level of food and sex only – there is a higher world too. A selfless life lived for others, too is an alternative possibility . . . I realize that it is never too late to mend." (346)

Prem is the image of a woman who succumbs to her physical desires, is bold enough to violate social norms but fails to break her mental inhibitions. Consequently she castigates herself for her deeds. Lacerated, scarred and isolated, she wakes up to the reality principle and retrieves herself. She remains a reminder as to how the right of self-determination can be abused.

Kusuma bhabhi is also guilty of transgression of moral norms and violates the code of conduct; nonetheless, she projects a positive image of woman. Dwarika Prasad comments: "The novelist has expressed her
woman-related attitudes and moral vision through this character of Kusuma Bhabhi: This woman, who blends in herself right of self-determination and new feminist aspirations, seems to be a symbol of feminism." Kusuma is deserted by her husband. Deprived as a wife, she starts loving Dāuju, who is her father-in-law in the hierarchy of relationships. Dāuju has stayed a bachelor because of his chronic tubercular disease. Kusuma loves him, conceives by him and bears his son. She does all this, under the same roof, in front of her husband’s eyes. When her folks oppose her, she gives a befitting reply:

"I came to this house after ritually marrying your son, making Fire God our witness, and performing Saptapadi. Did he keep the promise? He brought another woman to torment me. Since then, I have severed all relations with him. When the man who married me has ceased to be my husband, what relational ties can others profess who happen to be related to me only because of my husband?" (157)

Kusuma’s daring act is a total rebellion against feudalistic morality which holds the woman responsible for all kinds of impropriety and exempts the man. Kusuma imparts a real jolt to old value system by challenging social taboos with exceptional daring and determination. She acquires legitimacy for her son by forcing the family to accept him and give him Dāuju’s share of property. Kusuma’s relationship with Dāuju is a very bold step of great magnitude; it is almost revolutionary. But Kusuma, inspite of being brave and upright, doesn’t get as much space as Manda for her actions in the novel. Kusuma is restricted because of her social and familial
positionality. She is deserted and rejected by her husband and has to depend on others for sympathy and mercy. Hence possibility of growth and development in her personality is blurred. However, Kusuma blames poverty for her miserable plight. At one place in the novel she says, "It is my parents who are at fault. Why were they poor? If they were poor why did they see dreams of happiness for their daughter?"

The writer has imparted a new dimension to the relationship of Kusuma and Dauju. Forsaken by Yashpal, her husband, Kusuma is still living in that house because of Pancham Singh's kindness and sympathy for her. Pancham Singh (Dadá) known for his uprightness and sense of justice, allows shelter to Kusuma to undo the injustice done to her and to relieve his own guilty conscience since he too was a party in causing her pain. He confides in his wife, Kakko, "Kusuma hurts me like a thorn in the flesh . . . we have a responsibility towards her. She is a challenge to my sense of justice." (68)

While her husband lives with his second wife, Kusuma lives a lonely, miserable life like an orphan. Amar Singh (Dauju) is also lonely because he is a bachelor and chronically ill. Consequently they both are attracted to each other; their personal voids bring them together, and though for a painfully short time, they experience bliss of love and total surrender to each other. What is most surprising in this episode is that Dadá, Kakko and Bau – they all accept the child. Instead of humiliating and driving Kusuma out, they treat her amicably. The novelist in this context recognizes and asks for sanction to such relationships which are human rather than social. Such
forbidden relationships getting tacit approval are bound to bring a healthy change in social attitudes.

In the portrayal of Kusuma, Maitreyi Pushpa has presented a lonely, humiliated woman burning with desire. She explains the logic and nature of her relationship with Dāuju to Manda, "I was lonely, Manda, absolutely lonely. I was burning in desire, dying of thirst. Dāuju entered the wilderness of my life and flowed like a fountain of cool water. It seemed as if God has come in Dāuju's guise in the desolate temple of my life." The justification of this relationship lies in the instinctive desire and the subsequent search of a man for a woman. As Kusuma says, "it is futile to give a name to the relationship. The real relationship is that of 'thirst and water". Never married to Dāuju, Kusuma dons the attire of a widow after his death. She is a woman led by instinct and intuition, flouting social norms and sanctioned relationships. She very quietly transgresses the social norms. The acceptance of the illegal child by the family elders reflect the attitude of the novelist. It infers that the author takes a human view in the context of such relationships.

Kusuma thus presents the image of a deprived woman whose wounded pride emboldens her and gives her ample courage to look for alternatives. She is fully conscious of her motives. She reflects upon her situation, "I was drifting . . . carrying the hurt of wounded pride . . . then (on finding Dāuju) I cast off the slough of self-pity and low-self-esteem and a new Kusuma came out . . . my throttled desires found fulfilment in Dāuju..." (82) What distinguishes Kusuma's character and differentiates her from
Prem is her great courage of conviction. Due to this strength of character her love transcends the physical plane and borders on the spiritual. She is fearless and achieves an elevated position as a prospective mother. She exposes male hypocrisy, which makes her husband accuse her of loose morals and order her to abort her child. Feeling empowered as a mother, she protects her child with the typical ferocity of the female of the species, she dares Yashpal, her husband, to harm her and her baby: "Who are you to define my boundaries? . . . what right do you have . . . I consider you worse than a dog." (124)

Unlike Bau, and her traditional attitude about a woman's physical needs, Kusuma acknowledges body and its compulsive demands. She believes that these needs must be fulfilled because body has a right to them. She places purity of mind above purity of body and debunks the myth of female virginity as a holy cow. Her words said to Manda when she is raped, express her unorthodox opinion about rape and virginity: "Manda, don't let fear overtake you. Don't get subdued. Forget what has happened and never feel afraid. It's life and in such a long course of life many good and bad things happen. Why should it create a complex in you? Why should you blame yourself for something which you haven't done?" (94) However, these words shouldn't be misconstrued to mean that she is accepting rape as a routine matter and trying to reduce its gravity. Her unconventional attitude lies in not allowing rape to be used as a weapon against a woman to stigmatize and denigrate her.
Kusuma doesn't attach much significance to the ritual of marriage and its formality. But she also believes that a woman's life is incomplete without a man and such a life becomes painful and difficult. For her love is the only justification of a meaningful relationship between a man and a woman. Because of her personal conviction she always persuades Manda to find her man and settle down in life. Kusuma is cast in the image of such a woman who respects traditions but at the same time she has radical views about woman-related issues like love, marriage and sexuality.

This illiterate woman understands the meaninglessness of religious disputes between the Hindus and the Muslims. Risking her personal safety she takes it upon herself to clean the Mosque in the village which the fanatics try to defile. She challenges the hooligans including her husband: "I'll shoot him dead who tries to threaten me. I may be hanged for this . . . but I am a real 'baght' – a rebel." (257)

She sublimates her personal sorrow into spiritual power and from an initially weak and exploited woman she emerges all the more stronger and powerful with each rebuff. The author reveals another dimension of her personality when she desires to inherit Dādā's struggle for justice as a legacy. She expresses her desire to spend her life struggling for the cause of helpless and hapless humanity.

Kusuma may be an ordinary woman as the family and the society define her, but she has a great literary potential. In Kusuma, Maitreyi Pushpa portrays the image of an illiterate but enlightened rural woman who acquires a heroic stature with her uncanny grit and courage of conviction.
She is a modern awakened woman and she voices some of her creator's unconventional ideas about love, sex and marriage.

Kusuma struggles to come out of the slough of despair and distress and imparts meaning and purpose to her life by reaching out to her fellow human beings. She asserts her rights of self-determination and doesn't depend on others to fight her battle. She is a symbol of an independent and enlightened rural woman who lives life on her own terms even in adverse circumstances. This image of woman supports the author's brand of feminism in its Indian context.

Maitreyi Pushpa portrays each and every woman character with understanding and sensitivity. She explores and finds that even the most disreputed woman has a spark in her. Each one of them has some redeeming feature. The so-called fallen woman Lila, Abhilakh's mistress, loves him more faithfully than any married woman could do. Ahilaya, the whore, surrenders herself totally to Jagesar. Tulasi works day and night to feed her illegitimate husband. All these socially disgraced women impart amazing human warmth to their relationships. Together they create a general image of a "fallen woman" or a *patita* who is defiled only in body, not in mind.

Maitreyi Pushpa's inherent faith in woman as *Shakti* or *Kali* – the force which destroys – finds expression in the portrayal of Sugna, the lovely, soft and innocent girl. She is ravished by the scoundrel, womaniser Abhilakh at the behest of her own father, the good-for-nothing drunkard Jagesar. When his excesses and her forbearance cross limits, she murders
Abhilakh and subsequently commits suicide. She presents the image of a docile woman who also conceals volcanic wrath in her. It can prove dangerous to take her obedience and silence for granted. Her oppression can only result in inevitable breakout of violence. After showing remarkable courage and resistance, the author makes Sugna commit suicide and thus submit helplessly to the hostile social forces. She doesn't offer any solution to his bitter reality of an Indian rural woman's life.

Maitreyi Pushpa's brand of women characters created a furor in the world of Hindi novel. Creation of a new image of woman like Mandakini has verily enriched the corpus of literary writing. In the post-independence literature, woman has been offered a considerable space. But by and large woman has been depicted as a victim of exploitation. She has been treated by writers as a medium to portray the process of exploitation, the tragedy and the conflicts of the deprived class. Readers are forced to partake of their moments of sorrow, suffocation, pain and their tremendous capacity to bear. The author of Idannamam views and interprets her woman protagonists with a fresh outlook, and gives a new perspective to their portrayal. Her women cease to be mere "object", they demand and acquire for themselves the "driver's seat" and become the "subject". They don't remain satisfied with their passive role or ineffectual presence in men's lives; on the contrary, they acquire an active and central place and take the reins of their lives in their own hands. Rather they go a step ahead to become leaders and shape the destinies of fellow human beings.
Before Maitreyi Pushpa, Hindi women writers created, on one hand, heroines like Shakun (Adpka Banti), Rådhika (Rukogi Nahin Radhika), Sadhavi (Ek Aur Panchavati) and Vasudha (Tatsam), who were educated, intellectual modern and city-bred. On the other extreme are illiterate and indigent household drudges like Anåro (Anåro). Mandakini stands apart from all these women . . . the elite and the unlettered. Manda is a rural girl with little education. An intelligent and promising girl, she is a drop-out from school because of her family circumstances. Contrary to the popular stereotype of rural girls who are commonly portrayed as foolish and ignorant, she is an enlightened, thoughtful and serious girl with an awakened sensibility. More striking qualities in her personality are her immense courage, will to struggle, audacity and tenacity of purpose.

Maitreyi Pushpa is quite innovative in casting woman in this role. Most of the female protagonists in the novels of other women writers in Hindi have remained confined to their individual struggle, like a search for a suitable life partner in Rukogi Nahin Radhika; for sexual gratification in Mitro Marjani; divorce, remarriage and the problem of rehabilitation of a child in such marriages in Aåpka Banti, and remarriage of a widow in Tatsam. The will to cross the personal sphere to enter the public sphere is almost non-existent. These celebrated heroines of Hindi novel somehow remain enmeshed in their personal consciousness and no effort is made to reach out to the wider social consciousness.

Manda breaks new grounds. She has been created in the image of a conservative revolutionary who makes change possible in the given
parameters of a traditional society. In a patriarchal rural society much stress is laid on gender indoctrination. Approval or disapproval of children's and adults' behaviour when they conform to or deviate from their gender roles is a powerful way of making everyone adhere to sanctioned modes of male-female behaviour. According to such norms girls should be docile and obedient. They must not raise questions. Bau is worried when Manda makes enquiries about her father:

Manda won't sleep unless she knows. I know her nature. She is very firm of her resolve, none can force her to change her stance. I have advised her many a time that she shouldn't be so obstinate . . . who knows how many adjustments a girl has to make with people (after marriage) . . . and you, a girl after all, how will you perform your domestic roles with such obstinacy in nature. (23)

As Manda's guardian, Bau is very conscious of her growing body and it is a typical mixed response of joy and concern: "A daughter grows like a creeper . . . so quick, doesn't take time." (73) She tries to prescribe a dress code for her: "tell her to wear a dhoti (sari) now." (73) At another place, Bau reflects on the inherent home-making instinct in women: "It's truly said that a woman resembles a sparrow in nature . . . she must make a nest out of scarch." (86) Manda grows into a young girl imbibing all these so-called feminine traits which make her attractive and desirable to young boys like Makrand. Her traumatized and deprived childhood, the stigma of her mother's life, their dependent status in Shyamali, and the fact that the fatherless, unprotected insecure girl is raped even before she blossoms into
youth - every thing goes against her. The engagement with Makrand is turned down by his parents and Manda comes back to her native village Sonpura with a broken heart and a new-found identity. Kusuma Bhabhi’s advice to her has a prophetic impact: Manda, you are 'akshat' - immaculate. An immaculate virgin is worshipped by the Hindus as an image of "Shakti" or "Durga". Although Manda is physically defiled, she doesn't waste her life in self-pity and redefines virginity to mean purity of mind.

The image of 'Durga' or 'Shakti' in Hindu religion as a Mother of the Universe, epitomizes tender love, and with her abhayamudra (gesture denoting protection from fear) she comforts and reassures the terrified people, and grants them innumerable favours. The villagers see this benign aspect of the Goddess in Manda. But the same Durga epitomizes dread and destruction when she becomes Death incarnate - the "Destroyer" and "Devourer" of the evil and wicked 'asuras' like Abhilakh, Jagesar and the corrupt police officials. She spells terror in the mind of Abhilakh, a symbol of exploitation, who calls her "Kāla Bhairavi" and another police official calls her "Mahākāli" (358)

"Kāyale Vāle Maharaj", the guru and the mentor of Manda finds her courageous like Luxumbāi, who can undauntedly lead the people in their struggle against exploitation. No doubt 'pativrata' image has perennially remained the most glorified cultural ideal of Indian women. However, given the diversity and richness of Indian tradition, it is not difficult to locate and identify other important paradigms of female behaviour - paradigms which evince historical validity and cultural authenticity and appear to be more in
tune with women's contemporary quest for independence of thought and autonomy of action. Among such alternative paradigms of Indian womanhood, the image of the veerangana, the valorous warrior, seems to be particularly pertinent and significant. The distinctive feature of a 'veerangana' is her heroic courage and bravery. Elaborating the 'veerangana' image Rajan Mahan writes:

The 'Veerangana' evinces exemplary virtue in her conduct and behaviour, displays a sharp mind and mature wisdom and retains throughout a fierce passion for the defence of her people/nation/principlality. In a nutshell, the 'Veerangana' epitomizes a warrior woman who is committed to a cause, is a resolute courageous fighter who, more often than not, emerges victorious in battles to combat intrigue and treachery, and in a broad sense, is emblematic of the forces of 'good' which invariably triumph over the designs of 'evil'.

Manda's identification with 'Luxamibai' places her in the 'Veerangana' paradigm. Maitreyi Pushpa, not infrequently, explores this paradigm to cast her crusading female protagonists, reversing the gender roles and providing thereby a vision of the feminine that challenges the stereotyped view of women found in the traditional Hindu law books.

Manda's grandmother finds her 'mad and crazy' because she is not an average girl with average aspirations of happy domesticity; and other rural women like Median, who love Manda for her kind, affectionate and guileless behaviour, see in her 'a heart as transparent as a mirror'. Manda, is
in reality an image of 'Shakti' who appeals to different people in different forms depending on their own state of mind.

Mandakini is another name for the river Ganges which for the Hindus is a metaphor for purity. Manda's name attains significance in this context, meaning thereby that inspite of physical pollution she is pure and makes others pure by her contact like the "patita pawani" holy Ganges.

Manda invokes another popular image of Mira - the legendary Rajput queen turned devotee of Lord Krishna who defied gender roles and renounced a life of luxury to pursue her chosen path. Maitreyi Pushpa uses this image to signify an unconventional woman who remains undaunted by persecution and by sheer dint of her moral courage and determination wins her family and people to her side.

Woman as symbol of prosperity and fertility has been described as "māyā". "Sannyāsa", "Jog" or the path of renunciation are not meant for a woman. Mandakini turns down all offers of marriage and lives a life of austerity and celibacy. Such unworldly symptoms trouble Bau, whose only desire left in this life is to see Manda married. Bau says, "Look at my plight. Here is this girl, as if petrified and there those people in the village buzzing into my ears to get her married." (176) Sugna tells Bau about the views of the villagers regarding Manda; "when she sings Bhajans of Mira, she sounds as if a "Bairagin" is weeping."(176) Another villager asked her , ", . . suppose that boy of Shamali (Markanda) doesn't come . . . will you remain unmarried? . . . think of Bau at least." (176) Even Manda herself was heard telling the village school teacher, "I feel like renouncing the world. It'll end
all troubles." (176) Like Mira who celebrated her divine and ethereal love for 'Giridhar Gopal', Manda cherishes the memory of her love for Makrand. Mira's love spills out in her immortal songs and Manda's personal love flows out of her heart to become universal love, love for the suffering humanity. This love endows her with the moral strength to sublimate and subsequently transform her physical desires into higher form of spiritual energy that enables her to be a source of inspiration for the masses.

Like Mira she remains undeterred by public calumny and goes ahead in her mission of organizing people's protest against injustice and exploitation. The legendary women like Sita, Radha and Mira are a part of the Indian woman's psyche. They co-relate their life with these mythical women. Sita's exile, Râdha's separation from Krishna and Mira's persecution are relived and re-enacted in the personal lives of many women. Manda also finds a metaphor for her lonely and stressful human situation in the lives of these divine women.

The ideological premise of _Idannamam_ is this realization of the novelist which she professes with almost mantric force: As long as we remain centered in individual self, we don't come out of our personal grief. A wider concern for humanity draws us out of personal agony. Also, as long as we use others to fight our battle, we'll have to pay a price for it . . . each one of us ought to fight his own battle. Bau left her village and went to Shyamali because she was less confident of her own strength. She trusted Pancham Singh to fight her battle and inspite of her good intentions was cheated and disillusioned. Prem trusted Ratan Yadav and suffered. It was
only when she decided to fight her own battle that she took sane decisions and succeeded. Manda represents the new generation which is far more competent and confident. She is the most empowered female because she is educated and awakened. She persuades Bau to come back to Sonpura – her native village, which she makes her *Karamkshetra* or *Kurukshetra* to launch her battle against injustice. She extends her personal battle to the battle of the entire village. She doesn't impose herself on them as their leader; she herself undergoes the pain and agony of the exploited and the dispossessed. Rajendra Yadav has aptly remarked in the preface of this book: "Manda fights a double battle – one of being a woman and the other for the rights of the dispossessed."^{21}

While Bau, the grandmother grieves over the repudiation of tradition by Prem, her daughter-in-law; Manda, the grandchild, caught between Bau and Prem, her mother, exhibits rare understanding in favour of change and renewal. She nurtures her mother and grandmother by understanding and touching both lives in different ways. She understands and interprets Bau's behaviour towards Prem, her mother, keeping in mind the times and milieu in which Bau lived her life. Manda mature as she is, never becomes impatient with Bau. She seems to have assimilated this fact that though she belongs to the "present", she cannot sever her link with the 'past' that Bau represents. If Bau stands for a distant past, her mother is her immediate past. She receives nurturance from both. Manda's maturity lies in understanding and appreciating the inevitability of this continuity. She gives
due regard to Bau and her feelings and she heals her mother's wounds by restoring her right to motherhood which society had snatched from her.

Bau and Manda represent the polarities in the context of a fallen woman - Prem. Manda seeks forgiveness for her "fallen" mother so that she could be united with the mainstream, "you are an Elder Bau . . . our ancestor and two generations senior to us. Forgive her now. Please forget what she has done." (266) But Bau refuses to relent. Both of them analyze Prem's predicament from different angles, this difference is due to the difference of their age; they are responding from two different points of time. Manda wonders at the rigidity of Bau:

How could such an elderly woman be so mean? Imprisoned in the shackles of false, shallow and meaningless prescriptive norms, Bau became more and more fierce and formidable and couldn't show good will and sympathy". (266)

Manda is capable of analyzing the situation in an objective, dispassionate manner. Was this anger because Prem had transgressed norms, broken the "maryada" and tarnished the fair name of a respectable family or was this sheer hatred for Prem because of her excessive love for her son?

Bau favours annihilation of bodily desires for a widow. While sharing her experiences of widowhood with Manda, she dwells upon the excessive discipline and self control which she exercised to curb her bodily appetites and to avoid the unwanted attention of men. Bau argues that like her Prem should also have followed this rigorous code prescribed for the widows.
Without reacting Manda attributes Bau's behaviour to a feeling of jealousy for the younger woman: "May be Bau's pain is due to the fact that she had to bear the taboos and restrictions ordained for a widow whereas Amma defied them?" (268) The physical desires which Bau suppressed willingly or unwillingly, Prem acknowledged them as absolutely natural. This could also be a reason of her unhappiness. Why did she alone bear the social curse of a widow's life? Why didn't her daughter-in-law take her share of it? Why was only she expected to sacrifice her life to save the 'maryada' of the 'haveli' and Prem be allowed to claim an equal share of property? Manda tries to rationalize Bau's position and infers that Bau's own complexes seem to have consumed her generosity and hardened her stand towards Prem to the extent of pronouncing an exile for her.

Manda questions the problematics of a woman's sexuality: "Is there a woman who isn't tormented by physical desires? When a woman becomes a widow, do the sources of desire also dry up?" (268) She admits that none can deny primeval desires of body. Human life is a composite of physical and mental activity and her existence as such derives meaning because her body is alive to all these desires. Manda, on principle, advocates the cause of women's sexuality; but in her own life she exercises restrictions. Makrand is a part of her life but he is not the ultimate truth of her life. Through Manda, the author posits that the only truth of a woman's life is not the fulfilment of the primary thirst for man. Feminist awareness is not limited to an easy and fearless acceptance of a woman's physical needs. The author also reiterates that promiscuity in human behaviour is not synonymous with
freedom. Manda, an essentially free woman, doesn't believe in flaunting her freedom. In this sense also she conforms to the image of a traditional rebel, who respects certain meaningful traditions and follows them while she debunks some outmoded traditions which are no longer meaningful and progressive.

The traditional view on sexuality is represented by Bau who tries to convince Manda and challenges her position by citing examples from the great epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata which to a great extent are responsible for determining the moral and social paradigms in Indian society. She quotes the examples of Sita, Kunti and Draupadi – the great epic heroines who faced difficult ordeals to save the maryada of their families. Manda, however, can't believe in these mythical episodes without verifying them. She reiterates the need to re-examine and scrutinize the wisdom of the epics and the Puranas. Instead of following them blindly, they should be rationally reinterpreted according to changing times and followed with discrimination. It is significant that Manda's interpretation of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are appealing to the masses and she constantly links these myths to the socio-economic changes around her. She tries to examine the relevance of the Ramayana and believes that these great books were not written merely to entertain people. "The model of maryada purushottam was created to awaken the oppressed and the deprived." (195) She reinterprets Ramayana to inspire people to make a beginning of a protest, however small. To initiate a new chapter of rebellion is her underlying motive.
Manda being the central consciousness of the novel, the author selects her as a vehicle to critique the role of myths and legends in a modern society. She does not approve of a blind faith in old traditions which have lost meaning and relevance in the modern context. Manda is a woman who employs myths and legends as a means of uniting the villagers, bringing them together on a common forum and to reinterprets and reorient the tradition in the contemporary context. She successfully separates the negative aspects from the positive points of strength within the socio-cultural context.

Manda finally emerges as a feminist and imparts a critique of patriarchy. She feels that women have been worshipping and strengthening patriarchy in the name of maryada. By following this tradition of "male domination" they have blocked all roads leading to woman's progress. Manda reassures her grandmother that she is not trying to take sides with her mother, nor does she approve of her irresponsible behaviour. But she thinks that instead of passing judgment and pronouncing punishment, it should be left to time to take stock of things and do justice. She believes that time has adequately punished her mother for her actions. Whereas Bau's hatred for Prem conforms to the stereotypical relationship between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law. Manda's human concern for her mother accounts for the natural bonding between the mother and the daughter. Manda very candidly admits to Bau, "Good or bad, high or low . . . she is my mother after all. This relationship defies all considerations of its
being proper or improper, honourable or humiliating, rich or poor, fair or ugly, gainful or ungainly." (270)

Maitreyi Pushpa has explored the close bonding of mother-daughter relationship. Manda describes the effect of her mother's healing touch: "It felt as if my heart never knew pain, as if nothing painful had transpired... as if I were just a newly-born baby... pure and immaculate... like holy water of the Ganges." (114) Once as a child Manda looks at a bird's nest and remembers her mother: "When Amma lived in the house, it felt warm like this bird's nest. If the mother bird flies away, and the nest comes down broken, won't the baby bird fall down and die?" (80) She wonders why her mother deserted her. Wasn't she a mother like the mother bird?" (80)

The author stresses upon the truth that motherhood is the only certainty for a woman. Sugna's mother encourages Prem to patch up with her mother-in-law and ask for forgiveness, "Let Bau not consider you as her daughter-in-law. But you still remain Manda's mother. Even Brahma (creator of the world) cannot break this bond." (265) Sugna and Ahilaya - the former an innocent girl and the latter a prostitute - both have very close bonding with their respective mothers, and the mothers in turn are very loving and protecting. The author glorifies a mother's image and reiterates the fact that in most unfavourable circumstances a woman realizes the best in her personality through motherhood. Even the so-called fallen woman can hope for redemption in motherhood. The author invariably focuses on woman's image as a mother whereas man's image as a father doesn't find significance in her novels.
Economic freedom is a prerequisite for the empowerment of women. Economic viability of a woman strengthens her claim for equality with men. Women in villages play a major role in all agricultural activities. However, women like Mandakini belong to that privileged rural class where women do not work in fields. They observe purdah and look after other domestic chores like cooking, cleaning, etc. There is a clear-cut division between male and female activities. In the portrayal of her protagonists, Maitreyi Pushpa emphasizes the economic aspect of a woman's existence and highlights the truth that a truly emancipated woman is essentially economically independent. However, her women are not employed in any organized/skilled type of work. They are capable of earning their share of family income either by helping men in agricultural activities or by performing certain tasks which their particular communities are assigned in the rural hierarchy. Manda and Bau lose their land and are left with no source of family income. Bau feels constrained to sell certain belongings. Manda, at this crucial juncture takes a decision to fend for herself and Bau by reciting the Ramayana and the Bhagvata in her village. She finds accompanists, forms a group and visits neighbouring villages and gets some money. This semi-literate girl who knows no other skill other than reading and reciting scriptures manages to earn an honest living by using her melodious voice. This is an unconventional role for a rural girl. She announces: "None should worry, I'll look after myself". (166) Bau reacts: "Will you become a Mirasingh?" (166) She is deeply pained to imagine Manda in this role.
Manda also violates norms but these violations are unavoidable if change has to be ushered in. She violates her family’s age-old norm by opting for a male role and becoming a bread-winner of the family, she enters the outer world or the public sphere to compete with men. Still another violation occurs in her preference for a job which is considered low by their caste standard. She is the image of a self-reliant, self-dependent, woman who can look after herself and her family and who can counter male exploitation on account of economic vulnerability.

In an article *Chaukhaton Se Bahar*, the novelist posits that living within the periphery of patriarchal norms and values, woman has often been terrorized and frightened. The moment she tries to subvert her gender roles and asserts her individuality as a thinking, feeling human being, she is threatened with labels insinuating her of vulgarity and moral laxity. In a predominantly patriarchal establishment, fear and domination have throttled and quelled the voice of genuine protest and rebellion.

Every 'bold' woman has to pay the price for being labelled as 'loose' and 'immoral'. A woman who steps out of the threshold of patriarchy becomes suspect in the public eye. Even Bau, who otherwise loves Manda more than her life, is upset by her unconventional propensities and warns her: "Let me see how you dare step out. Aren't there other girls in the village? Why don't you live like them? Why do you try to be exceptional? Can't you take interest in worship and prayers"? Why do you have to fight and quarrel?" (202) Jagesar frequently threatens Bau with dangerous consequences if Manda is not forced into marriage and put within male
control. A free woman appals the community. First of all her own kinsmen exert pressure and raise opposition. A lot of mud-flinging is done to deter Manda from her chosen path: "It is heard that Manda has an access to government officers. Why should she marry? Marriage will put a stop to her wayward life style." (217)

In the process of Manda's struggle to assert her self-identity, she becomes aware of the miserable plight of the villagers. Poverty, exploitation, and a tyrannical, despotic hold of capitalistic and feudalistic vested interests on the lives of landless farmers and tribals present a very bleak and gloomy picture of the village which is groaning under the octopus like grip of land mafia. The village as she left it as a child seems to be a romantic dream when she returns to see it changed into a nightmare. The ignorant, illiterate and simple people are terrorised on the one hand by the avaricious exploiters and on the other by the corrupt police. Accustomed to living in almost unchanging surroundings, depending on fate and mercy of their heartless masters – the villagers present the image of a directionless herd of dumb driven cattle. Inspired by Tikam Singh, Manda makes it a mission of her life to unite and organize the hopeless people for whom she feels motherly compassion. She inspires them with courage and awakens their pride and self-esteem. With the pretext of reciting the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, she exhorts them to start a mass movement, to resist injustice and protest against exploitation, to fight for their human rights and live with dignity: ". . . those people cannot work hard and sweat like you . . . only you can do that. Why do you demean yourself before them? Why do you
consider them great? For no reason whatsoever you humiliate yourself . . .
don't underrate the value of labour in this way." (40)

People understand the force of a mass struggle and they fight for their
rights in Manda's leadership. She finally emerges as a grassroot leader. Their
suppressed anger and indignation against a corrupt system needed to be
channelized and they wanted a selfless, self-sacrificing leader like Manda:
"You lead us, 'beta' . . . people will follow you automatically". In Manda's
emergence as an ideal grassroot leader Maitreyi Pushpa envisages the new
rural woman - an empowered and emancipated woman. In a democracy
political power is the highest power and unless woman is granted her share
of political power, the slogans of empowerment of women will sound hollow
and meaningless. The author portrays a very optimistic picture of a
grassroot leader in Manda, who is truly representative of the majority of
women in India. A considerable majority of Indian women live in remote,
far-flung villages. They are not privileged like their city-bred counter-parts.
Partially educated, caught up in their daily toil of making both ends meet,
bound by various gender roles, bearing the brunt of caste and class
discrimination and burdened with a responsibility of keeping alive traditions
- this section of women offers the most viable potential for change in society
at large.

Manda vindicates Maitreyi Pushpa's confidence in women because
she holds them superior to men, since nature has endowed them with a
special power - power to create - to be mothers. Tikam Singh
acknowledges woman's unique role: "We are fortunate to have a woman as
our legislator. Mother and woman who is an embodiment of Shakti, can never be corrupt . . . She does not do injustice, she does not indulge in mean, selfish and cunning behaviour because a mother does not betray her children." (189) Political big guns acknowledge Manda's hold on people and woo her support in elections. She doesn't associate herself with any political party because it is not her aim to achieve a position of power. Her access to the center of political power provides her an opportunity to serve those people who have reposed faith in her leadership. Even her arch detractor Jagesar admits that Manda is a power to reckon with: "... and now! Look at this slip of a girl. Six feet tall 'daroga' has come following her like a kitten." (337)

This image of a woman as a force to reckon with in the political sphere which has hitherto been predominantly male-dominated, doesn't indicate a hard-core feminist bias of the author. She links it with a wider social awareness and presents it as a natural corollary of woman-empowerment.

Apart from entrusting her protagonist with this onus of providing political leadership to the masses, the author also focuses on a very significant and active role played by a woman in the protection of the environment. A woman's life is more closely related to nature and environmental conditions; and any harm done to them affects her life adversely. Manda fights against indiscriminate misuse of farmland in the form of quarries; consequent pollution resulting in various fatal diseases and social evils like drinking and woman-bashing and woman trafficking. She
includes the rehabilitation of the victims of this land grab, and the preservation of the fauna and flora of this region in her agenda. The author gives a new dimension to the image of a leader and makes her a tenacious social activist with an awareness of environment.

Rajendra Yadav's preface to *Idannamam* has been entitled 'अपनी धर्म भव' - Be a lamp unto thyself,' which is the message of the Buddha to his followers. Mandakini - the image of the new woman in Hindi literature is essentially the image of a self illumined woman. She doesn't require social props, labels of political parties and clout of various labour and trade unions. Manda, a rural girl in her early twenties, lacks glamour, publicity and marketing skills. She is not equipped with impressive college or university degrees in management. This self-inspired, modest, quiet and unassuming girl rises slowly but surely and like a little lamp succeeds in dispelling darkness around her. She illumines and enlightens other lives also. A truly emancipated woman doesn't seek her personal freedom only; she takes upon herself the responsibility of disseminating light and freedom in the lives of people around. Manda is the image of a rural girl, more modern and emancipated than many of her counterparts in the cities because she uses her hard-earned freedom in a most positive manner.

What is common to all the women protagonists of Maitreyi Pushpa is their very strong community roots. They do not have any individual identity outside the community. Under no circumstances can they think of severing themselves from the community. Manda, the young revolutionary finds her power-base on her own soil and within her own home. Her protagonists,
while creating a wider space for themselves, cross the threshold, find a workplace "karmakshetra", fight their battles but never get uprooted from their soil. This rootedness can be attributed to the rural background of these women.

Manda reflects Maitreyi Pushpa's vision of the new woman. But Prem Kumar Mani, writes in his review of *Idannamam* that the author unnecessarily burdens her protagonist with her own ideology. Another critic Rajendra Prasad Pande also finds Manda's portrayal unconvincing. He feels that whereas other images of woman presented in the novel are realistic, Manda's image as a charismatic leader appears unnatural and contrived. The exaggerated idealism of Maitreyi Pushpa depicts Manda taking up leadership everywhere. Despite her limited exposure and information she is shown tackling everyone including a minister, a doctor and a police officer. Like Kamala Markandaya's Rukmani, Manda has also been created as a larger-than-life character who is capable of rising above human weakness.

A study of Maitreyi Pushpa's novels reveals the author's pronounced commitment to the feminist cause. She extends the limits of feminism by connecting it to the common women of the villages and reconceptualizes woman empowerment in the Indian, especially the rural, contexts. Some forces and groups who envisage emancipation of women as a threat, dismiss feminists as "middle-class", "westernized" and "rootless" women and view feminism as an "elitist", "city-centered" movement. Maitreyi Pushpa proves this propaganda wrong by creating a new image of the rural woman of
India. Her female protagonists are stunningly emancipated women. Through these woman images the author tries to prove that in the Indian social groups the seeds of feminism are present almost in every woman. To be a feminist a woman doesn't require to know the feminist jargon or phraseology nor does she need to be equipped with theoretical sophistications or be associated with feminist movements. All that is required is an awareness of injustice and the courage to put an end to this social injustice, male discrimination, and double standards. An unlettered peasant woman doesn't have to be familiar with feminism to know that no one has a right to beat or rape her, or treat her as a commodity or deprive her of her basic human rights.

Maitreyi Pushpa's women are feminists in the sense that they refuse to compromise with injustice. Awareness to them means "power"; and they use this power to their advantage. These women are powerful voices of rebellion without any overt self-consciousness or pretentions to being rebels. However, rebels they are, endowed with a particularly acute sense of responsibility, choice and freedom. Their rebellion doesn't alienate them, rather it brings them back home to their communities. Here, in their context, identity is never tied up with a severance from community, as it is in the Western aesthetics. They realize their identity in the framework of community to which they are inextricably rooted.

Securely grounded in the rural milieu, these women never want to renounce home, nor do they ever question their gender roles. Seeking strength from their family and marital status, they wage a war against gender
biases, social and cultural prejudices, and strategies of domination and exploitation on their home ground. However, they don't remain contented with personal freedom. After attaining individual freedom and feminine space for themselves, they widen their sphere of action and fight for the rights of less fortunate and deprived fellow human beings.

Mandakini, Kusuma and even Prem – all these women protagonists who share a common history of deprivation, after fighting their personal battles try to reach out to larger humanity and make them socially useful. The personal identity of these women is linked with their social self. These women, who are invariably endowed with leadership qualities, finally become members of an extended family – the villages, and simultaneously remain integrated individuals as before. The authors, like God, create their characters in their own image. Maitreyi Pushpa's major women characters also project the image of their creator – the image of a conservative revolutionary.
Chaak (1997)

Maitreyi Pushpa’s novel Chaak strongly raises the issues of women’s rights and accepts the inevitability of change and modernity in the rural context. Significantly Chaak is prefaced with the lines of a Red Indian poetess Joy Herzog proclaiming her freedom from fear and a new identity with a new beginning. This daring and defiant attitude is predominantly present in her protagonists, who are invariably rural women. This is exactly what sets them apart from other men and women around them. It is almost a trademark of all her heroines.

This theme of snapping the bond with fear is a major theme in all her novels. But what is significant is the fact that this freedom is not a mere attitude or stance. It is very real and authentic because its genesis goes back to the novelist’s own rural past, her ancestry, childhood and youth. The author’s autobiography Kasturi Kundal Basei (2002) bears a testimony to her deprived past and a legacy of defiance and struggle which she inherited from her parents, especially from her mother who fought for women’s emancipation with the zeal of a crusader.

Sarang, the protagonist of Chaak, like Manda, is educated and steeped in the cultural ethos of the village. She is a perfect housewife loved and respected in her family and village. She actively participates in the rituals and ceremonies that foster and promote the well-being of a community life. However, she is shocked out of the easy calm of her domesticity when her widowed sister, Resham, is murdered by her dead husband’s brother in broad day-light and the case is projected as an
accidental death. Sarang perceives this murder as the death of a woman's archetypal desire for love and motherhood. It suddenly reminds her of all the so-called suicides committed by women in the village and she wonders how many women will have to die before the elders of the village finally took cognizance of such gross injustice. Sarang is also reminded of her deprived childhood in a charitable boarding school or Gurukul where she was sent because her step-mother resented her presence at home. Old wounds are touched again as she remembers the humiliation and consequent suicide of a fellow student for her involvement with a male teacher in the school.

Resham's death proves catastrophic and Sarang's life takes a violent turn. Nothing gives her solace and she persuades her husband, Ranjit, to join her in her compulsive fight against Doriya, the killer of her sister and his family. Ranjit argues and counsels her not to stick out her neck for a sister who was after all too bold, too uncompromising and completely wrong in her resolve to bear an illegitimate child. Sarang, however, fails to overcome her sense of distress and violation and gets Doriya arrested by the police. But he manages to bribe the police and gets acquitted. Chandan, Sarang's son stands threatened by the miscreant and his family and he has to be sent away from the village to live with his uncle who himself is an unscrupulous police officer. Separated from her only child, Sarang plunges deep in a sense of loss and emotional vacuum; and she loses the will to move on or protest.
It is during her fight for justice that she begins to understand the true meaning of home, of motherhood and the place of an elder in a household. In her hour of crisis, Gajdhar, her father-in-law stands by her and emerges as a symbol of dignity, integrity and fearlessness which she associates with her community. As her sense of loneliness and violation is appreciated and understood by no one else, she is slowly attracted to Shridhar, the school teacher, to whom she turns for support and who is as persistent as she in the face of opposition and unfair practices in the village community. The burning of Gulkandi, a low-caste girl, for marrying a man outside her community, and an attack on the school teacher, Shridhar, by Sarang's own husband, for his refusal to sign papers falsely implicating him in a case of obtaining illegal public grant for the school, are events which further push Sarang to stand in rebellion. Her decision to step out of the portals of her home to fight the village Panchayat elections is an expansion of the space that she allows herself and a blow that sends the corrupt of the village staggering.

Atarpur is a typical village of North India caught in the process of change, especially during the years between the sixties to the nineties of the last century. The author vividly portrays discreetly carved out women against this background. As individuals they also represent various images of woman present in the rural society. While focusing on the changing sociological scenario, the writer strives to write the lives of rural women, capturing in the process the images of change in the midst of age-old beliefs, superstitions and social taboos. Anita Vashishta writes in this context:
Woman in India is the carrier of tradition and a nodal point for change and transformation. She becomes the very site for struggle evolving precariously and compulsively into a victim-survivor, who is both subversive and servile by turns and will probably continue to be so till she achieves the optimum bliss she deserves and looks for.27

Through her depiction of women, the author posits that little has changed for a woman in Indian society. She is still the means of achieving the purusharthas, namely, Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksa. However, she herself is often seen as aspiring to nothing more than the well-being associated with the mundane and the ordinary. If in any case, her aspirations tend to rise beyond the prescribed limits, she invites the wrath of her masters and consequently gets brutally punished for the transgressions.

The old Kherapatin dadi, the old village bard, functions as a vehicle of tradition. She is the folklorist or the village chronicler who has kept alive the folk history of the village in her countless songs and stories. She is the store-house of such tragic stories of unhappy women whose untimely death was sometimes ascribed to some "natural calamity" and at others to 'fate'; whereas the real killer was always protected as innocent." (8) These chronicles of sacrifice tell us about the hapless women who got buried alive under the earth like mother Goddess Sita to save their honour . . . "It could be Rukmani who put a noose around her neck or Ramdei who jumped into the well and Narayani who entered the watery grave in the river Karban . . . well, it is an endless story." (88) With tears in her eyes, the old Kherapatin transmits the age-old wisdom and beliefs to the younger generation. The
essence of her experience is that the mother of daughters "treads a thorny path," or that "her soul always bleeds" or "her life is spent on the cross," or "she never sleeps in peace" and that "the body of a daughter carries the banner of her family's honour". (11)

Village women listen to the tragic tale of Chandana who was put to death for her extra marital affair and they try to internalize the message conveyed through this oral tradition of passing on wisdom to posterity. They nod their consent when Kherapatin says, "women and animals ought to be lassoed", or that "a married woman burns in hell even if she touches the shadow of a man who is not her husband." (13) Sarang visualizes that with the passage of time the murders of Resham and Gulkandi would also become a part of the sequence of these tragic deaths. The verdict of society proclaims them offenders. The irony being that those very men who violate and defile women brand them characterless and conspire to kill them.

Resham is cast in the image of a young radical who is brutally killed for her convictions. She is a young attractive widow yearning for love and motherhood. She continues to carry the child growing in her womb inspite of repeated requests from the mother-in-law to get the foetus aborted. Resham would not reveal the name of the father, she would not adopt her brother-in-law as her husband, and she would not leave her dead husband's home for her paternal village. She considers it a woman's natural right to satisfy her bodily appetites and to be a mother if she so desires. She is disinclined to marry her brother-in-law against her wishes just for the convenience of the family. She doesn't want to leave the family for legally
she has a right over her dead husband's land and property while her father's home does no longer belong to her. For her defiance of the male dominated family structure she is trapped in an old dilapidated store-house and is killed along with the child in her womb.

Maitreyi Pushpa interrogates female sexuality through Resham. Her only fault, as the author sees with Sarang, the female protagonist, is that instead of accepting the traditional frailty of her sex she dares to recognize her own abilities and has mistakenly "reposed faith in herself". She sees the murder as the repression of the archetypal desire, a complete annihilation of woman's natural right to motherhood. Maitreyi Pushpa has tried to relate various woman centred issues to the Indian context in this novel. She touches upon most of the issues raised by various feminist movements and then tries to contextualize them in the Indian context offering thereby a discourse on woman. Her women raise new questions related to female morality, a woman's right to her body and womb. These questions are sometimes quite embarrassing even for a transitional society.

Resham's death raises question as to why shouldn't a widow also be granted the right to conceive and bear a child if she so desires. The apparently innocent questions posed by Resham challenge the age-old norms and threaten to disturb the social structure. "Does a widow happen to be just a widow and cease to be a woman?" (18) She further asks : "If God considers a fatherless child sinful, why doesn't He curse a widow or an unmarried girl with infertility?" (18) She asks her mother-in-law, "Do you think your son's death has extinguished all the fires in my body? Can't you
differentiate between a corpse and a live, throbbing body? Do you think I also died with your son?" (18) She wonders why a mother wailing for her dead son should be bent upon killing her child.

Resham feels that it is the exclusive right of a mother to bear a child and the community has no role to play in this natural act. Despite being a woman, Resham tries to show masculine courage. But she forgets the fact that a single, unprotected woman cannot win her battle just by being bold. Predictably, she is punished for challenging the male authority.

In Chaak Maitreyi Pushpa doesn't repeat the typed images of women. The world of this novel is inhabited by a variety of uncommon women characters who play their exclusive roles in different social contexts. They have individual personality traits and cannot be placed in one common category. However, there is one common factor that unites them all, "Most of the women in the village are illiterate, and the literate ones have almost forgotten what they learnt at school after getting occupied with their routine lives." (27)

Man-woman relationship is an area which most of the contemporary women writers have tried to explore with much elan. The space Maitreyi Pushpa offers to critique is unexpectedly complex. Woman, as the old bard in Chaak narrates, always comes to grief if she reveals her hidden passions, her independence in the matters of the heart or her inability to comply with forced decisions. Inspite of exceptionally bold women like Sarang, Resham and Gulkwandi who dare to choose their own destinies in matters of the
heart, there are ample images of distraught women and unfulfilled relationships.

*Bari Bahu* in the novel presents the image of an upper class rich woman of the village who always hides the festering wounds of her heart from the public eye but shares her agony with Sarang because as daughters they belong to the same village. As the eldest daughter-in-law of an upper class family it is her sacred duty to please others. These duties don't allow her to fight for her rights like a common village woman. In return for her rich food and expensive clothes, she is expected to keep her mouth shut. She is compelled to obey her widowed sister-in-law like a slave. Her life is worse than all other women of the village because the strict 'purdah' observed in the rich families reduces the woman to the position of a captive. Even the company of her husband is denied to her during day time; he is only a nocturnal visitor who comes to her only for quick sex. She doesn't have a right to share her sorrow with the man, her husband whose child she carries in the womb because she doesn't dare spoil those few moments of her husband's company in the dark. There is always a threat that the husband would be lured away by other women in the village or prostitutes in the town. She bewails the day when her father married her in a rich family and snatched for ever her right to protest. Ironically, the perpetrator of her misery is none other than a woman, a widowed sister-in-law who has turned into a monster due to her own deprived past.

Panchanna Bibi, the sister-in-law of *Bari-Bahu* reveals another horrifying image of perversity. Widowed in the prime of her life she is
forced to live a life of confinement in her father's prison-like 'haveli'. Unable to control her youthful desires and physical appetites, she deviates from the prescribed norms for a widow. She is discovered in the company of her Jat lover. Her 'baniya' father couldn't harm the bold young man, therefore, his anger was targeted entirely on the young widow. Surpassing all limits of cruelty her merciless father got her breasts branded with red hot iron. That was the punishment which the beloved daughter of the family received for harbouring passions and desires in her widowed bosom. Repression of the natural urges and inhuman persecution by her own family turn Panchanna bibi into a ferocious creature who would not allow other women of the family to taste those pleasures which were forbidden to her. She gets sadistic pleasure in torturing and tormenting her sister-in-law and in turn makes her life a virtual hell.

Manohar's wife is an image of repressed sexuality. This young attractive woman who is married to an impotent man turns mad and roams about naked in the streets. She tears her clothes and in fits of mad hysteria laughs, cries, and sings, lewd songs "begging to borrow a man for a night". This uncontrollable woman who has stepped out of the jurisdiction of village authority is branded as churail, dayan or dakini because no ordinary woman can be so shameless. She is forcibly taken to an exorcist who tries to cure her by putting her face on burning chillies. A normal woman with natural desires is driven to insanity because her impotent husband couldn't satisfy her and when she conceived, he got the foetus forcibly aborted because he doubted her fidelity. Society instead of questioning the man, punishes the
woman. "Whenever a woman fights for her rights, she is labelled a churail."

(214)

To add to this category of frustrated women, there is another image of a scandalized woman, the wife of Champaram. It is interesting to note that most of the women in the village are known by their husband's name. The author does not give them any proper names because women do not have any identity other than the gender roles allotted to them. Champaram's wife prefers to stay away from her husband and dies very young while living with her parents. The reason of her self-imposed exile is that Champaram is an effeminate man and dances like a woman wearing 'lehanga' and 'ghungrus'. Women taunt her by calling her 'the wife of an effeminate man'. She dies unattended and uncared for because a woman commands respect in society as per her husband's status and a woman married to an effeminate man – a eunuch, has no place of her own in the rural patriarchal set-up and is relegated to the lowest rung of social ladder.

Single, middle-aged women are most vociferously articulate and bold. Kalawati Chachi, Longsiri bibi and Harpyari present the image of rural viragoes. Kalawati is an abandoned wife, Longsiri's husband has left her for another woman and Harpyari is a widow. Male-protection imparts security to a woman but she has to pay a price for it, which she does by submitting to the master her personal freedom and independent will. Since these single women are not accountable for their behaviour to any male authority in the family, they comparatively enjoy more freedom than the women living under male protection. Emboldened by their situational
positionality, they become intrepid and domineering. Since they have left behind their vulnerable youth, they take advantage of their age and function as self-styled watch-dogs of morality for younger women. Hawk-eyed and censorious, they are dreaded by the village women in general because they can make or mar any woman's reputation in no time. That is why young daughters-in-law coming to the village after marriage are advised by their mothers-in-law to "be courteous to Longsiri bibi." (228) Nobody takes Kalawati seriously because she finds fault with everyone and "gobbles up people's character like a pancake." (228)

Longsiri, who is the only heir to her father's property, never lived with her husband. Her deprived desire turns her into a tyrant and she tortures her own widowed mother for her love for Badri Brahmin because to nurture desire is a forbidden fruit for a widow. She guards her mother like a watchman, humiliates her and even beats her for escapades out of the house. She locks her mother up in the house when her paramour is lying on the death-bed; the mother, unable to bear the torture, ultimately dies. She was so brutal in her youth that she couldn't see young people together. She presents an extreme case of repressed sexuality turning into perversity. Later in her life when she experiences motherly tenderness towards Shridhar, Longsiri begins to change. Her loveless life finds an object of love and she starts thawing. She regrets her behaviour with her mother and atones for her past sins by going to the extent of allowing Shridhar and Sarang a secret meeting in her house and supporting Gulkandi's marriage. Maitreyi Pushpa interrogates the stereotypes of suppressed, docile and timid women who
bear their rejection as a stigma. Longsiri becomes bold and brash with a vengeance and settles her scores with the society which brutalizes a woman by denying fulfilment to her womanly longings.

Kalawati chachi is another example of a perverse middle-aged woman who finds sinister pleasure in poking her nose in everybody's affairs and scandalizing people. Though a village gossip, she exhibits tremendous courage when the situation arises. She helps Sarang in her acts of bravado and surprises the reader by her daring act of sleeping with Kailasi Singh in order to restore the virility of the dejected wrestler. An illiterate and orthodox woman, Kalawati voices the most radically feminist slogan of a woman's right to her body when she remarks: "We Jat women carry the Bichhia, (toe-ring) in our pocket and wear it for the man who appeals to us. What is so shocking about this?" (104)

The society that imposes strong restrictions on women, also invokes them to courageously break those restrictions. The male dominated society creates women like Gulkandi, Sarang, Longsiri and Kalawati who are free from sexual inhibitions to such an extent that at times their individual freedom comes to identify their social position. Resham fought for a widow's right to love and motherhood and she was punished with death. Gulkandi also asserts her right to choose her lover and once again she is penalized with death. Resham decides to stay in the village and fight her battle. Gulkandi elopes with her lover and marries him secretly. But in both the cases their daring acts fail to vouchsafe a happy future for these girls. Both of them are fiendishly killed for violating the social and moral norms.
Both Resham and Gulkandi are inextricably rooted in the village and community. They could have escaped death by staying away from the ambit of village authority, but they prefer to remain a part of the community since they have no existence without it. This sense of close belongingness is typical to the rural psyche.

Gulkandi's death is a telling comment on the rigid caste structure still operating and influencing women's lives in the villages. Inter-caste marriages may not attract public attention in metro cities of India but the life of small towns and villages is frequently thrown out of gear by such incidents. The agrarian village society which adheres to feudalistic norms maintains a very rigid caste structure and strictly prohibits inter-caste marriages. A girl who marries in a caste lower than her's sins against the entire community by stigmatizing its honour and, therefore, deserves punishment. On the contrary marriage in a higher caste is leniently viewed. Gulkandi's mother doesn't approve of her marriage with Bsnudeva, a Khatic (Dalit). She gives her a severe beating and her words reveal the dynamics of caste which determines the lives of people, more significantly of women.

Harpyari herself belongs to the barber community, who belong to the lowest and the fourth varna, but they are still higher than the Khatiks in the caste hierarchy. She boasts of her moral uprightness when she claims to have rejected the advances of rich and high-caste men.

Maitreyi Pushpa's average women are a part of this casteist culture. They are its promoters as well as victims. But the rebels like Resham,
Gulkandi and Sarang make desperate efforts to break the norms and cross over the lines. Thus, they try to assert their individual right of taking decisions about their own life which also relates to the right to love and live with men of their own choice. However, they are made to pay a very heavy price for their daring act.

*Chaak* depicts the prolonged battle which Sarang fights and in this sense it becomes the saga of a woman's struggle for emancipation. This novel can be read as a significant "feminist text". But more than a "feminist critique" it goes beyond the limits of a personal, familial and social tragedy and finds a political context that cannot be ignored. Sarang, like other typical protagonists of Maitreyi Pushpa, is a woman who we all imagine throws herself deeper and deeper into the mire. However, the quintessential reality about all of them is that they are the women who have empathy for others because of their own deprived past and family histories. In order to understand Sarang's acute sense of violation at Resham's murder and then Doriya's attempt to humiliate and molest her, it is necessary to explore her deprived and cruel childhood. Considered too difficult, Sarang had been banished from home and sent to a boarding school at the insistence of her step-mother. Hardly able to sustain the insecurity of the separation from her father, she is strictly disciplined in the Gurukul where the lessons of austerity and asceticism are taught to the underfed girls, terrorized and closeted in the company of female teachers and attendants. The account of her school days reiterates that the fearful burden of her past is transmitted into her adult life. The severe punishment and consequent suicide by a
fellow student involved with a male teacher is an indelible part of her inherited past just as much as is her knowledge of reformist Arya Samaj movement, Vedic Shlokas and rituals or Dayanand Saraswati's *Satyarth Prakash* and its puritanical teachings. Instead of taming this spirited girl Sarang, the Gurukul made her a rebel and she instigated a revolt among the girls against its rules by resisting food. She was expelled since she could be a threat to the discipline of the institution. Her father thought she was crazy. In her later life, Sarang tries to change herself with a vengeance: "Can anyone tell that I performed yajna? Recited Shlokas? Crammed *Satyarth Prakash*? studied *Abhijyan Shakuntalam* and *Kumar Sambhavam.* This woman in the veil is the wife of Ranjit, not Sarang." (93)

As a mother, wife and a rural woman, Sarang has totally dedicated herself to the chores and duties of day-to-day living and is for a while unable to recognize her own past. The self which had learnt to take in its stride the vicissitudes of life, and had witnessed the complexity of diverse human relationships, is incredibly lost now and it seems impossible to retrieve it. She finds no relief as the old wounds are touched again. Nothing seems to have changed, as another woman is forced to die to bury her desire beneath the earth. Turning to the community she finds little solace as she hears the trembling, tear-soaked ballads of the old village bard singing of the woes, the eternal misery of women since time immemorial. The venerable and the wise keep mum. Sarang feels outraged. She sounds exactly like a modern day Draupadi who doesn't only make an appeal to the elders but goes a step ahead when she condemns them for their impotence: "... why were they
dumb-struck . . . why were their tongues paralyzed? Do these so-called great men deserve laudation? or condemnation? Why do we respect them and spend our lives keeping our heads bent before them . . . will they ever tell why they remain dumb spectators of our doom." (15)

Disappointed with the community, she turns to her husband and prepares him to avenge the death of Resham. She takes a pledge like Draupadi to get Doriya behind the bars and get him hanged. Initially Ranjit goes all out to help her in her resolve because he respects her. Against public opinion he avows : "I shall not backout. Everyone is not fortunate like me to get a bold and beautiful wife like Sarang. At least she has guts to speak out her mind." (46) Living precariously on edge, as a result of this running feud, the relationship between Sarang and her husband begins to turn bitter as Ranjit fails to appreciate her stubborn resolve. For Sarang, the principles of truth and justice are important and she only emerges stronger after she is physically attacked and is determined to deal a blow to the self proclaimed goon or wrestler, an embodiment of evil, and demonic strength of Duryodhana and Dushasana. Her husband, Ranjit perplexed by her sleepless nights and the intensity of overwrought mind advises her, "Read Bhagwad Gita, it will give you strength". But Sarang is differently made. In a moment of conflict she thinks : "Why, don't I live like other women in the village? Why isn't any other woman in this village doing things like I do? Even these women are aware of right and wrong but they do not interfere in the world of men." (140) She remembers her stepmother who used to say,
"Sarang! you'll suffer because of your errant ways. A daughter, and so bold and head-strong!" (140).

Analyzing the rebel in Sarang, Parmanand Srivastav writes: "Propensity for rebellion in her was circumstantial, not instinctual. However, it was neither a sudden emergence nor a magical outcome of Shridhar's company." This trait in her personality should be seen in the context of her unhappy childhood at home and Gurukul. Sarang's rebellion is not exceptional and unprecedented. A small village like Atarpur has a history of such rebellious women who tried to break norms and disobey restrictions. Nonetheless, they had to pay a heavy price for their daring. Resham and Gulkandi are the contemporary versions of the folk heroines like Chandana and Manjha. Commenting upon Sarang's situation Anita Vashishta writes:

Sarang, like other women characters of Maitreyi Pushpa, is the repository of suffering; carrying within her collective unconscious, centuries of exploitation and blame of distraught emotions and feelings. The repetitiousness of life and its rituals suddenly turn meaningless and she painfully gains consciousness of her personal truth. No longer can she accept her condition through recourse to the age-old concepts of destiny, fate or female frailty. She shudders to think of her collective past in the village, a past that is full to the brim with instances of women's woes, tragedies and narratives of deprivation, cruelty or shame. In her moment of severe existential and social questioning, Sarang finds a total sterility in the hitherto unquestioned authority of tradition, folk-wisdom or woman-narrative
as handed over to her by the community of women who surround her."

Sarang suddenly feels suffocated by the little ceremonies, songs, social and cultural rituals which keep women tied to the mill, to their home and hearth. She even detects poison and pretence beneath their normal smiles and calm exteriors. She finds that fear has bulldozed them into a sort of deliberate refusal to recognize the truth. Alienated, Sarang faces a crisis of identity. She goes through the travails of change in the process of finding a new meaning and purpose in her life. Her stereotypical role in the family as somebody's wife and daughter-in-law fails to satisfy her restless soul which is striving to carve out a wider space for itself. This conflict of mind reveals a split in her personality: "Oh my God! Ranjit's wife has discarded all sense of decorum and propriety, Sarang thinks again and again."(133) Ranjit's wife and Sarang are alienated and face each other as strangers.

Sarang wants to challenge the tradition which has been blatantly unfair to women. She wants to change history and put a full stop to the long sequence of these stories of martyrdom and sacrifice of women. She wants to redefine history and appeals to Kherapatin, the old folklorist and minstrel:

Didi, I very well know this story which begins with Chandana and ends with Resham's death . . . but I pray to you, now don't go further . . . if you do so, there is doom ahead . . . if you continue, the world will end . . . if you don't stop, you'll invite catastrophe." (10)

Sarang intends to add a new chapter in this unwritten history of marginalized village women. She cherishes freedom for her – freedom from
fear. This freedom is very difficult to attain. It entails an overall change and change doesn't, however, come easily in the world of Sarang. It emerges slowly from the painful ferment of indignation, self-analysis and self-awareness. Before she takes a new form she has to go through the agony of new birth, of creation – which is like sitting on the potter's wheel, incessantly moving and turning her on and on till she acquires a shape and a form. It is in this context that the metaphor of Chaak or a potter's wheel gains significance.

In Maitreyi Pushpa's novels sexual politics, oppression and exploitation are deep resources in women's history leading to inevitable resistance and change. It is this history of oppression and exploitation which creates a character like Sarang and transforms other women also. Freedom from fear and awareness of her identity and rights create a storm in the consciousness of a woman and this storm paves the way for change. This process is difficult as it involves the tremendous effort of a feeble stream striking against mighty rocks and cutting across all hurdles in order to find a safe course. The author takes into account the rise and spread of this new awareness among the exploited and oppressed women of the village. The death of Gulkandi, Harpyari and Bisnudeva who are an integral part of the women's world, bring each and every woman of Atarpur out in the streets in protest. They came out in such large numbers that it seemed as if they would break all walls and doors.

People living in the metropolis believe in the myth that the rural population of India is deeply steeped in darkness and that the process of
change and progress hasn't touched the villages. They believe that people in the villages live in an insulated state of passivity and the tearing conflicts of values are not known to them. Maitreyi Pushpa rejects this myth. Chaak is a literary document of the life of these rural people who are constantly changing and acquiring a new form. They take their own decisions and exhibit remarkable courage to face the consequences. Regarding rural women there is a myth that they are uneducated, orthodox, backward and incapable of any intelligent thinking. Maitreyi Pushpa explodes this myth too and presents her women in a different manner. Her women may not be highly educated but they are intelligent and thinking women. 'Manda', 'Sarang', 'Alma' – all of her protagonists are capable of intelligent thinking. Infact they prove better than their male counterparts in their thought and actions. Not only the protagonists, even other women like Kalawati and Longsiri who are initially presented as conventional die-hards are amenable to progress and change because they are intelligent and receptive. Bari Bahu's unstinting sympathy for Sarang, Kalawati's daring decisions to sleep with Kailasi Singh, the wrestler, in order to relieve him from self reproach, Longsiris gesture to give protection to Sarang and Shridhar and her repentance for the harsh treatment meted out to her mother, her open support to the secret marriage of Gulkandi, and shoe-beating Harprasad for his misdemeanour – these are the brave and courageous acts of these women which impart strength to Sarang to fight for their common cause. Solidarity builds up as Sarang begins to espouse the cause not only of Resham and Gulkandi but also of the entire community of women.
Sarang succeeds in creating a sisterhood; fights injustice; and steps wisely into the political arena. In the beginning she says about herself: "I am only a weak woman" and begs her husband for help, "you have the strength to alleviate my suffering. . . who else but you can I depend upon. . . " (8) Towards the end of the novel Sarang becomes a force to reckon with.

The metamorphosis of a weak woman into an embodiment of power becomes possible only because Sarang doesn't remain an individual, she represents the entire community of deprived women who have reposed their faith in her. She becomes a symbol of their aspirations and struggle for freedom. A long-cherished dream comes true: "The daughters of the earth have come out to break the iron chains." (430).

Goddess Sita is said to be the daughter of the earth. Sita is the role model of every traditional Indian woman and she cherishes to be like her. Maitreyi Pushpa subverts the myth of Sita. Her protagonist refutes male authority and refuses to prove her worth by accepting the fire-ordeal. She reposes faith and confidence in her own worth and challenges the unjust forces which have enslaved and chained her through ages. Sita is not her role model. She desires to fight her own battle: "Why should we aspire for Ram-rajya? We all know the story of Sita. Why should we struggle at all if we are going to end like Sita, getting buried under the earth? I only want justice. Even at the cost of my life I want to fight against injustice. I take this humble pledge and want to fulfil it." (417) The image of Sarang leading the women of Atarpur in a democratic fight against injustice signifies the wakening of women after the hideous oppression of ages.
Sarang subverts another popular myth of Savitri – the 'Sati' who doggedly follows the God of Death and brings her husband back to life, signifying the power of a pure woman dedicated to her husband. Disobeying Ranjit, Sarang accompanies injured Shridhar to the hospital. She feels in herself the presence of mythical Savitri pleading before Yama, "O Yamaraj! I must accompany my Satyavan." Shridhar, the lover replaces the husband. Sarang creates a new morality by redefining relationships. Marriage ceases to be sacrosanct. Love and not mere rituals determine the sacred relationship between man and woman.

On another occasion Sarang observes a fast on Karvachauth which married Hindu women do for the long life and well-being of their husbands. Sarang redefines the ritual by finding a place for Shridhar along with Ranjit in her prayer, . . . "Ranjit is here and Shridhar too." (190)

The most important characteristic of feudalistic agrarian dynamics of relationships is the ownership of woman and land as personal property. In this system "defiance" to the authority is nothing less than "rebellion". That is why defiant women like Resham and Sarang are unacceptable and cannot be tolerated. Both of them revolt but in a different manner. Resham's revolt remains limited to her own personal level; Sarang, on the contrary, imparts a wider base to her revolt and includes every woman in it. Resham starts it on a micro level, Sarang fights it on a macro level. Her battle is multidimensional which on the one hand creates a turmoil in her personal life and on the other poses a challenge to the moral fabric of feudalistic and traditional social institutions. For this purpose she uses modern competitive
and democratic tools. She enters the domain of politics, fights the Panchayat elections against men and makes a qualitative intervention in the traditional set-up of village society which is essential to bring a change in the status of women and ownership of land. For Resham and Gulkandi freedom is an end in itself but for Sarang freedom is a means to realize many more values. For her love is not an end in itself which is to be enjoyed and saved at any cost. A love that weakens a person should be abandoned.

Contrary to Ranjit, Sarang and Shridhar are extremely progressive characters and the author selects them to present her vision. Sarang certainly represents the rural or the desi version of a committed feminist. What makes her special is that apart from her search for 'self' she exhibits a desire for social integration, a resolve to keep together her family, and to strengthen her foot-hold within the community. However, Rekha Awasthi writes in her review of Chaak: "Sarang is not a formula character created with feminist biases, and also she is not a product of the writer's imagination. Rather, the writer restrains from giving an exclusively feminist stance to the story."\(^{36}\) Another critic, Khagendra Thakur endorses the same opinion: "Although Chaak is a narrative of the difficult struggle for woman's emancipation and winning power for her, it is not a feminist narrative. The basis of this argument is that though Sarang fights against male authority for an equal status for women, she doesn't consider man as such her enemy. Hence, she doesn't establish feminism essential for woman's emancipation. In her struggle, Shridhar and Bhanwar are not only her sources of inspiration, they also give her strength. Even her father-in-law, Gajdhar
Singh, becomes her guardian and favours her against his own son. In the same article Khagendra Thakur interprets the closing scene of the novel to maintain that even Sarang's husband, Ranjit, against whose authority she has been fighting her battle, comes to the realization that Sarang is fighting for a just cause, that he too is sitting on the potter's wheel and acquiring a new form . . . that he is changing. He rests his head on the closed door of Sarang's room and waits for it to open implying that in Sarang's victory lies his victory also; and the right of self-determination for which she is fighting will benefit him also.

Sarang could have opted for personal happiness. Her life was happy and satisfying for about ten years after her marriage with Ranjit. However, the trouble starts with a growing awareness of injustice. She becomes painfully aware of the fact that the people around her are completely desensitized to the suffering of women and their lot is even worse than that of animals. Even most of the women are unquestionably moulded into the fabric of male-centred society and the patriarchal value systems, having internalized the sole responsibility of carrying the burden of family respectability, regardless of what men do to compromise it. Even if women feel for each other, they don't dare go against their men, who are the custodians of their lives. This comment of Resham's mother-in-law is quite revealing in this context: "Resmian, I wish I could hide you in my eyes, but what will I tell the men of the family?" (21)

Sarang wants to see a ruthless war waged against the rampant injustice. Initially she exhorts her husband to fight her battle, since she too
has been brought up with the age-old samskaras which forbid a woman from crossing the "domestic" or the "private" sphere and enter the "public" sphere. The injustice in the "public" sphere reflects various ugly images of injustice done to them in the "private" lives of women. Sarang grapples with the "truth" of a woman's existence; and the revelation of this truth strengthens her resolve to fight her own battle, since Ranjit buckles down under multiple pressures.

Ranjit is otherwise very fond of his educated, accomplished and beautiful wife. He confides in her and tells her that his friends were jealous of him. They feel "a girl so well educated is rarely found among the Jats. There can be no comparison between a Gurukul educated and a college educated girl. While one is a butterfly, the other is a nightingale." (225)

Ranjit's problem starts with the new found identity of Sarang. He tells her to retain her feminine qualities and charm: "Behave like an average woman; maintain your limits; demand clothes and jewellery like any ordinary woman; desire and sulk for things like permission to go to your parents' village. I'll sacrifice myself to fulfill each and every desire of yours. But how can you expect me, who has protected you like gold within the bound of this house, to allow you to traverse the dangerous zone beyond its portals?" (374)

Sarang becomes painfully aware of the truth that the "private" and the "public" cannot be segregated beyond a certain point. They impinge upon each other from time to time and leave a definite impact. Sarang's struggle gains significance and achieves success because she links the
"private" with the public. This is an act of transgression . . . aspiring for the impossible . . . asking for the moon. In a moment of self appraisal she says:
"... But I aspire to get the moon. Why only Ranjit . . . No man in the world can get it (for a woman)." (374)

The beauty of Sarang’s personality is that she strikes a wonderful balance between these two worlds – the private and the public. This balance appears to stagger when she enters politics. This is the second major step undertaken by her which also substantiates the fact that the battle for social justice cannot be fought alone. One has to rely on democratic forces which include the state and more significantly the public.

Quintessential to freedom is the right of self-determination. Disappointed with Ranjit, Sarang realizes the need to pitch her battle against her husband also in order to get the right of self-determination, because he is the symbol of that authority which a male dominated patriarchal society exercises on her. This is the most difficult battle a woman has to fight; as Sarang also experiences when she defies the age old norms: "Sarang! you have committed a sin graver than killing a cow . . . to betray your husband is equal to betraying God himself." (139) It is easier to fight against social evils and orthodox customs. But Sarang has chosen a far more difficult and thorny path since she is fighting her own husband. She analyses the situation dispassionately, "Look here, by following tradition and obeying the prescribed norms, you will remain happy and secure. You are trying to challenge that power which has never known defeat. By opposing Ranjit you'll destroy yourself." (183) Ranjit pronounces: "I am the master of this
house. Only my will prevails here . . . I, who am the lord and master." (156) Sarang is aware of the reality that, "she who rules in the house like a queen, can be shown the door within a minute . . . the ultimate truth of her situation is that she still can stay the queen if she shows compliance with Ranjit's will." (156)

The entire village knows that "Sarang is obstinate and stubborn" (308) and will not retrace her steps. She marched ahead step by step. The Grihalakshami, who has conformed to the norms of a respectable household takes to defiance. Her first act of defiance is to invite Kailasi Singh, a reputed wrestler secretly to defeat Doriya who is the killer of Resham and who has tried to violate her honour and threaten to kill her only son Chandan. He is also the cause of her separation form her son, who has been sent away because of threat to his life in the village. She seeks revenge. Her second act of defiance is her independent decision of calling Chandan back from Agra without taking Ranjit's consent; and admitting him in the village school where Shridhar has joined as a teacher. She becomes her son's guardian by defying the father's natural right. Her next step of defiance is when she writes the script of the play, Ekalavya, and helps Shridhar in its presentation. Another important decision which she takes without Ranjit's permission is to accompany injured Shridhar to the hospital for treatment and stay there with him. This act distances her from her husband and brings her closer to Shridhar. This intimacy culminates in their physical union. Her last and most crucial decision is to file her candidature for village Pradhan in the Panchayat elections without taking Ranjit into confidence. Each step of
defiance strikes a definite blow on the solid and secure citadel of deeply entrenched male supremacy. It strikes back with a vengeance and tries to break Sarang who resists and emerges stronger with each blow. Her father-in-law gives her a befitting compliment: "Sarang, I know that you are the daughter of a Jat, so brave and courageous, but now I have learnt that your tender and delicate body has been cast in iron." (414)

The portrayal of Sarang's consciousness delineating her pain as a mother on account of the forced separation from her son; her deep concern for her old father-in-law; and her constant guilt vis-à-vis her husband—are all internal dialogues with the 'Self' mapping the contours of her lonely mind as she goes about her household chores, visits the homes of other women or participates in the social activities of the village. She is threatened by violence by her own husband and troubled by thousand vacillations. She is maligned for attachment to Shridhar and accused of infidelity. The entire life story of Sarang is marked by milestones that measure her freedom from fear—"the fear of being thrown out of her own home, fear of her husband's bitter taunts, fear of defamation, and most of all the fear, guilt and terror of bringing her own family into the circle of vulnerability."9

Sarang is a unique blend of the rebel and the traditionalist, the spiritual and the sensual. It is this ambivalence in her personality which accounts for the excruciating conflict which she undergoes. She is the image of a visionary and like all visionaries she has to go through ordeals. Imbued with idealism and asking for the moon, she never loses her hold on the solid ground on which she stands. She wants to live life to the fullest, be honest to
the core in all her womanly roles and still be herself. While caught up in the demands of physical existence, she doesn't lose sight of her conscience to which she owes responsibility. Deeply rooted in tradition, she is fully aware of the unique importance of institutions like marriage and family. She is fully conscious of the absolute rights of a husband on his wife vis-à-vis wife's duties towards her husband in a patriarchal society. In her persistent struggle for self assertion, she fights against Ranjit the husband, and a symbol of male authority and not Ranjit as a man. She shows remarkable understanding for his compulsions and weaknesses, knowing fully well that he is the product of a long tradition of male superiority which encourages discrimination. While creating a space for herself, she doesn't break the family, neither walks out of it, nor discards her husband. Instinctively caring and nurturing she always tries to retrieve her loved ones back to her. Ranjit's home-coming after a hellish night symbolizes the end of a nightmare and an assurance of success for Sarang. She wins a double battle – the private as well as the public. Even though Ranjit is her adversary, she doesn't blame him: "How can Ranjit be blamed? Anyone would behave similarly in his situation. Monopoly on wife is a man's inheritance. To lose that monopoly is like losing your ancestral and inherited land." (339) Hesitating to accept Shridhar's suggestion to enter the political arena, she says: "I don't want to hurt Ranjit. This is not 'patidharma' this is 'manav dharma' – my duty as a human being. In these duties which seem shackles to you, lie our happiness and peace." (400) At another place she justifies his behaviour as a racial
trait: "you have a right to punish me in the severest way and I am accustomed to bearing every cruelty." (211).

It is typical of Maitreyi Pushpa to introduce some male character other than the husband who provides support and moral strength to the female protagonists to fight their battle against injustice and male dominance. By doing so she seems to show her strong grip on the reality of rural India, where the process of change is very slow and a woman doesn't feel confident and equipped to wage an independent war against inequality and injustice. Another reason could be to redefine Western feminism in the Indian context. Indian ethos has always undermined the 'individual' and any struggle for social change has to be inclusive rather than exclusive. The concept of *Ardhanarishwara* presupposes the presence of male and female in a human being. Therefore, both these components ought to be harmonized and all our efforts should aim at unity and not collision.

Shridhar Prajapati plays a similar role in *Chaak* which Tikam Singh or (Kayale Wale Maharaj), a social worker turned holy-man, plays in *Idannamam*. However, Shridhar's role as Sarang's lover complicates the story and raises certain moral issues of vital significance. Shridhar enters the novel as a teacher in the village school but Sarang finds in him a soulmate and a 'Guru'. In her first encounter with him she raises a storm by touching his feet because it is against norms for a high caste Jat woman to touch the feet of a low-caste man (Shridhar is a potter's son). This incident vaguely reminds of Mira, the Rajput queen, touching the feet of Raidas in whom she found her Guru. Shridhar initiates Sarang into a new credo and starts the
process of carving out a new identity for her. The attraction between Sarang and Shridhar is not that of an ordinary feeling arising from physical attraction between opposite sexes. It is a very deep bond as both of them are committed to one common cause - their struggle against social injustice.

Sarang bears the social stigma and her husband's rage. She faces physical violence and threats of dangerous consequences but refuses to dispossess Shridhar of a very special place in her life. From Sarang's position, the author raises the question of a woman's right to love, her freedom of sex and her right on her own body which the husband considers as his occupied territory. Asserting her right on her body, Sarang says: "Shridhar, my heart is stubborn. It urges me to take my body back from that master with whom my father sent me off in marriage" (322). She is conscious of the public opinion when she avers: "According to the women of the village, I have defiled my 'dharma'". (322) She feels hurt when she hears women's comments: "Ganga (the holy river) wins every heart, but who'll love a dirty pond?" (328) But the very next moment she regains conviction: "Let them call me a dirty pond or a filthy gutter. I don't consider my act (of love) as a sin - I was fully aware of what I was doing. I was neither ignorant, nor a widow, nor a young innocent virgin tormented by youth." (328) Thus Sarang emerges stronger after her experience with Shridhar. She surrenders her body and soul to him and with this act of self-determination she tastes freedom by tasting the forbidden fruit which always tastes sweetest.
Sarang's awareness of the reality of her situation, her dormant strength and latent potential are sharpened through her relationship with Shridhar who is her Sakha. He loves her as a woman and as a kindred soul but doesn't exercise man's authority to enslave her and, therefore, helps her experience her nirvana or "emancipation". This triangle of love according to Khagendra Thakur, "not only makes a comment on man-woman relationship, but it also necessitates a new discourse on woman's place as well as her role in changing society; and also provides a new and apt direction to our thinking. Such fundamental questions about a woman's freedom as – freedom from whom? freedom for what? . . . and how much freedom? are raised and satisfactorily answered."

The process of this awakening in Sarang is slow but sure. Her conflicts and fears are convincing. It requires great courage to risk the security of home and family which a woman so much needs; more so in the case of a rural woman like Sarang who is economically dependent on her husband. Maitreyi Pushpa hasn't raised the issue of economic independence for a woman in this novel. However, this fundamental issue plays a seminal role in a woman's dependence on man and causes a major hurdle in her struggle for freedom and weakens her resolve.

Sarang is full of fear, doubt and apprehension at the thought of moving towards a course she cannot retrace. She is afraid of demoralizing her husband, of neglecting her domestic duties and of moving into an unchartered, unknown territory. Even Shridhar, at times feels diffident and guilty. He blames himself for instigating Sarang and creating a turmoil in
her happy and peaceful life. He feels the need to educate men before educating women. He feels exasperated on seeing the condition of women in village: "Women's predicament is the same from the lowest to the highest caste. Their slavery is similar and the restrictions are the same. It is not the family but their love for the children which gives them courage to live. They can also go to the law and the courts to demand their rights. But they are beyond their reach. Even if they dare to do so, they are surrounded by their detractors." (345)

Shridhar's misgivings are silenced by Sarang's tenacity of purpose and capacity to bear. With an overwhelming feeling of love and respect for this heroic woman, he dedicates himself to her cause: "I bow before you Sarang! – a woman so brave but abused and blamed – you are the image of an honest, sincere and courageous woman." (182) He pledges: "You are educated and know that our constitution has granted you an equal status . . . I will become an instrument to make you stand . . . you cannot stop me . . . my role will be like that of a potter in giving shape to the pitcher." (400) He exhorts her, "... you have love . . . give it to the masses. With sharing you'll expand . . . and people will automatically follow you."(400) Sarang doesn't want to humiliate and malign her father-in-law. She shudders to think of the public reaction. Shridhar pricks and prods her and tells her the bitter reality: "You can be throne on the elevated altar of the 'Satis' like a Goddess – but will never get an equal place with men – It's impossible. 'Equality' is a dangerous word and to attain it . . . ? (401) Shridhar voices the message and the purpose of the author: "It is a time-tested truth which our scriptures
uphold that the indigent have to fight for wealth, the weak for power and the ignorant for knowledge. Only this effort differentiates a man from an animal . . . Sarang! It is not a sin to seek freedom from bondage. . . . Don't waste your talents. Why don't you accept the fact that you are more efficient, intelligent, courageous, practical and determined than Ranjit. Therefore, you take up the task which Ranjit has failed to do." (401)

The issue of a woman's body is closely related to her 'womb'. Right on the body gives her a right on the child also. Sarang fights for a mother's right. When Chandan is sent to live with his uncle against her will she feels deeply hurt and almost crazed with pain. Separation from the child turns her life into a wilderness and she feels lost in a void. The realization that she has no right to take decisions about her own child, stabs the life out of her and she cries in pain : "... as if Chandan is only your child . . . you are his creator . . . his nurturer . . . why every thing! . . . and I am nothing . . . nothing . . . absolutely nothing . . .?" (56)

Sarang raises the question of the guardianship of a child. Should only a father make all decisions about a child and a mother have no say at all? Shridhar tries to mitigate her apprehensions regarding Chandan and reminds her of a woman's strength as a mother : "Don't lose heart. You're Chandan's mother and don't forget that it is the mother who bears a child and she happens to be far more courageous than the father." (155) The idea that the child is more hers than any body else's give. Sarang the strength to bring the little boy back to the village so that he may learn his own traditions, and legitimately inherit his agrarian roots and environment. She
overcomes her vulnerability and against anybody else's will, takes decision about Chandan: "I won't allow others to demoralize me. My Chandan is mine only – my own son. I must bring him back. His coming will re-establish my right on this house (will increase my hold on this house many more times). Chandan is not a mere off-shoot of mine – he is the very root. He is my life, my world, my creation." (157) Thus Maitreyi Pushpa constructs a strong argument in favour of a mother's sole right on her child and his guardianship. She re-inforces her stance with examples form the cultural and folk tradition. Shridhar makes Sarang aware of a woman's unique position as a mother.

"The persecution of women will create some Manjha out of them who will bear her child as she desires. No matter she bears him in a forest. Nobody will control her womb – neither the king nor the master nor even a god. The child born in this way will recognize only its mother . . ." (214)

Sarang demonstrates a strong commitment to her rural existence. She is totally integrated in the village environment and desires no other life. She doesn't want Ranjit to shift to a city like Agra and abandon his ancestral occupation of tilling the land. She has no ambitions to educate her son in a city; she rather dreams of his future in the village itself. Sarang bears resemblance to her creator in many ways. Through her life and struggle the author has raised some burning contemporary woman-related issues. Maitreyi Pushpa has the distinction of analyzing all such modern issues in the backdrop of a village which is still traditional – this village and its scenario is her own, she belongs to it and has a grip on its life. A successful
and great writer never leaves his or her soil. Sarang replicates Maitreyi Pushpa in her rootedness to the village.

Maitreyi Pushpa's women may entail a certain amount of uncertainty and trepidation but there is no alienation and withdrawal from home, community or responsibility. Cooking meals, cleaning, washing, procuring and storing food, working in the fields or in the cow-shed are as much on Sarang's mind as elections, its campaign and legal battles. Thus he mundane, daily grind cannot be given up in order to pursue larger social activities. Sarang is filled with anxiety and fear at the thought of reaching home late from the village school where she is organizing a play. When she steps out of her house for the first time to file her election papers she is terrified at the thought of meeting her husband there, or at being taunted for neglecting her household duties. Thus, tied to her traditional domain, the woman in these novels moves beyond the portals and touches many more lives before she comes home to roost; and she gains ground bit by bit, always staying between two portals - the domestic and the political. The author protests against confining woman to the 'domestic' and segregating these two spheres.

In the author's rural narratives, widow remarriage or rehabilitation of the abandoned wife becomes a real issue, because inheritance of property is involved here. Her characters show guts to refuse partnership for mere convenience and still strenuously guard their rights to property. Resham is one such example.
The role of the community or 'biradari' is crucial in the lives of rural folk. They identify themselves with the community and, therefore, do not have any existence as individuals. Community is deeply rooted in the fictional world of the novelist and individual identity beyond community holds hardly any meaning in the network of relationships that make up the dense social fabric of her fiction. Her protagonists find their power base on their own soil and within their own homes. Ranjit explains to Sarang the importance of the community: "In the eyes of the village, you are the wife of Jat Ranjit Singh and this is your identity. We have no existence other than the community and the society to which we belong. We have no status out of the biradari. That is why it is imperative for us to obey its rules." (143) This biradari functions like a watchdog and imposes a code of conduct on individuals which they cannot defy without impunity. The fear of the biradari brings the errant on the track.

Ranjit echoes the double standards of the community regarding female morality: "I want you to understand that people take a lenient view of moral lapses on the part of a man because his promiscuity doesn't defile him. But it is not so in the case of a woman. Her chastity testifies her goodness. People call an unchaste woman a prostitute and a whore." (209) To consider a woman foolish, incapable of understanding things which require intelligence, or to malign her for being fickle, selfish and revengeful - are customary practices which individuals imbibe from the community and repeat by rote to undermine her position. Sarang, in filing her election
papers, gives a rude shock to the conservative society accustomed to seeing their women in 'purdah'. She provokes a very typical reaction.

"It is well said that if a woman comes to assert herself, she can give a crushing defeat to man . . . A woman eats twice as much a man does, she is four times shy, six times brave and eight times sexy. That is why she is pierced and chained with ornaments. But this wife of Ranjit is far more stronger than men so that inspite of being pierced and chained, she seems so terrifying." (403) At another place Ranjit tells Sarang : "Politics is above women's head," and at another time he taunts Sarang by calling women generally deviant : "Even if you lock women underground, yet they'd find their way out. They are known for corrupting men." (284)

The Pradhan equates a woman with power because "they both are slippery and once they slip out of hand, they don't come back". (272) It is the community which feeds the male ego out of proportion and, therefore, to be defeated by a woman is considered the blackest shame. Sarang's decision to contest election comes as a blow to the Pradhan and he prefers opting out of the contest; because to accept defeat from Sarang would be extremely humiliating. For Ranjit it would be similar to losing masculinity and being considered impotent. These typical male responses reflect the deep-rooted gender bias in village community which surfaces at the slightest provocation. The position of a married woman is the worst because she is a direct threat to the male ego.

In the election scenario of the village a very interesting trait of the community comes to light. The men in the village feel less threatened by a
single woman, be it a widow or an unmarried woman who has none to take orders from . . . If in any case a married woman enters the political fray, she is appreciated only if she remains invisible and remains satisfied with being a mere rubber-stamp, allowing her husband to wield power on her behalf. Maitreyi Pushpa has taken up this issue of woman's expected invisibility in political sphere of the villages in an award-winning story 'Faisala' translated into English with the title 'The Verdict' and converted into a film titled 'Vasumati Ki Chitthi.'

Gajdhar Singh, the father-in-law of Sarang is an exception. A village elder, respected by the community, he has most liberal outlook about women. He compliments Sarang when she comes back after filing her nomination, "you have become Ranjit for me because you are fulfilling those dreams which I expected he'd fulfil. You are walking on fire and one who crosses through fire gets purged and comes out as pure gold." (410) Gajdhar's attitude about Shridhar's role in Sarang's life is also very unconventional. He attributes Sarang's feelings for Shridhar to the racial character of Jats who are brave and liberal. He doesn't approve of double standards of morality for men and women. He tells his distraught son:

We are Jats known for open-heartedness . . . The liberal and brave traits which we have in our blood, our women also have the same domineering and daring spirit in them. To cling to women's pettcoats doesn't behove our race." (331) He advises Ranjit to improve himself to deserve a woman like Sarang.
Anita Vashishta observes: "In all her novels Maitreyi Pushpa presupposes the reader's acquaintance with Hindu mythology, ancient Dharamshastras and the entire idea of Parampara as it is handed down from woman to woman. In Chaak also, the novelist gives meaning to a vast body of myths and kathas that form the repertoire of classical Hinduism conceived as a 'sanskriti', a sort of Weltanschaung."

In Chaak the female protagonist, invokes the image of Gargi, one of the two wives of sage Yajnavalkaya. As an enlightened woman, Gargi is eager to gain knowledge of some deeper truth to alleviate her misery. Having read and learnt Hindu texts, both classical and modern, Sarang is in a position to interpret them without prejudice. Gargi was inquisitive, a quality not appreciated in women. Sage Yajnavakaya warned her: "Gargi! don't ask questions . . . or your head will fall." Sarang too is threatened with dire consequences for transgressing her feminine limits and trespassing into the male domain.

Sarang is acutely aware of her duty of dharma as Grihalakshmi, and she is deeply immured in her grihasthi through her role as wife and mother. She is keen to perform rituals for good luck, for peace and for prosperity; believing in them as much as anyone else in the village.

Sarang, who rejects Sita as a role-model for herself, quite often reminds us of the image of Draupadi. In beauty and brilliance, self-determination and tenacity of purpose, she bears a close resemblance to this epic heroine. Ranjit's aunt makes an appropriate comment as Bhanwar, Ranjit's cousin feels strangely attracted to Sarang, "Ranjit, if you bring such
a beautiful bride, your brothers will ask for their share like Pandavas." (47) Her instinct for revenge is reminiscent of Draupadi who instigated her husbands to avenge the outrage she had to face in the presence of the venerable elders of Hastinapur. Sarang on her honour being violated by Doriya, takes a pledge to see him hanged. She goes to the extent of breaking norms by inviting Kailasi Singh to defeat him in a wrestling bout which is reminiscent of mighty but wily Duryodhana and Dushasana challenged by brave Bhima. A parallel situation arises when Gajdhar Singh takes up his gun to kill Doriya and says, "We are not like Bhishma Pitamah who can see Draupadi denuded in the assembly of the great warriors. They were gods – may be they could do it . . . we can't." (48) This seems to be a more appropriate and human response.

The epical contexts have become a part of the racial memory. When Sarang decides to fight elections, the villagers see their doom and they are instantly reminded of the Mahabharata which was fought at the instance of a woman – to redeem her honour. Fateh Singh, the Pradhan also equates Sarang with Draupadi when he says, "Woman became the cause of the fall of Hastinapur and Pandavas were forced to wander from door to door . . . there is nothing new in what is happening today." (408)

Sarang's metamorphosis from a docile, obedient wife into a formidable opponent is suggestive of the emergence of woman as Shakti or Kali. The Hindu mythology has created schismatic goddesses : on the one hand, Durga is difficult to know and unapproachable, on the other, as mother of the universe, she epitomizes tender love. Kali, " often thought of
as Evil, Destroyer, Devourer, is also the Creator – the Universal Mother. Parvati is mild but terrible too. Dalbir, Ranjit's brother calls Sarang – Bhawant\(^a\) – the Shaktirupa goddess when she fires a shot in the air on finding her husband crossing all limits to decent behaviour and trying to humiliate the "mother" in her.

Fateh Singh virtually faints on seeing Sarang in the election office. He feels as if Sarang has appeared as Durga\(^b\) riding on the lion, ready to drink his blood.

Maitreyi Pushpa presents all these mythical images of women recreating and redefining them in the modern context. These are images of women who continue to be nurtured by quasi-philosophical myths or religious texts. Together they make up their consciousness, their awareness of Self and even explains their departures from tradition.

Sarang and Manda, the female protagonists of Chaak and Idannamam respectively, share quintessential similar personality traits. They are typical Maitreyi Pushpa brand of woman – bold and beautiful, emancipated, rebellious and visionary women with an awakened sensibility and heightened sense of awareness. Both of them decide to fight against injustice in their given circumstances. What differentiates them is their social positionality. Whereas, Manda is an unmarried young girl, Sarang is a married woman and a mother. Sarang's struggle becomes more complicated because of her marital status which entails male domination, less amount of freedom and many more restrictions and taboos. In the absence of any close male relative – a father or a brother – Manda doesn't have to fight
patriarchal oppression in the private sphere of the family. Sarang's battle becomes complicated and grim since she has to fight against patriarchal oppression in the family itself – against her own husband who happens to be the symbol of patriarchal authority; and at the same time, a person with whom she shares the most intimate relationship.

The other woman images presented in Chaak also reflect the changing social attitudes regarding certain vital, woman-related issues. Most significant being a woman's right to her body and womb; which also implies her right to live with a man of her own choice, and a mother's right on her child. Maitreyi Pushpa's rural women seem to have imbibed their creator's unorthodox views regarding female sexuality. They assert it as their natural right. In terms of man-woman relationship, the ground traversed by the author is quite complex. Woman, as the old bard narrates, comes to grief if she reveals her hidden passion, or her independence in matters of heart or her inability to comply with forced decisions. Despite offering images of distraught women and unfulfilled relationships, there are women like Manda, Kusuma, Resham, Gulkandi and Sarang who dare to choose their own destinies in matters of heart.

Mandakini and more explicitly Sarang present the image of a woman who as a potent rival of man proves her worth, competence and superiority in the political arena. Maitreyi Pushpa ardently advocates woman's entry into politics which manifests her empowerment and an equal degree of participation in the execution of this power.
Other important factors which contribute to the formation of a woman's image are rigid class and caste hierarchies prevalent in the villages. The female protagonists in *Chaak* and *Idannamam* belong to a particular class and caste in the North-Indian villages which constitute the rural middle class or the rural bourgeois i.e. since the author herself comes from this particular section of society, she being an insider, is very authentic and convincing in the portrayal of the images of women belonging to this particular section. Maitreyi Pushpa spares herself the task of depicting women from that lowest section of rural society which lives on a bare subsistence level. Since middle class women, both in villages and in cities, are the ones to bear the maximum burden of traditions and taboos, consequently they are the ones who provide most suitable site for protest and rebellion. A logical corollary of the argument is that more the restrictions, the stronger the urge to violate them. Whereas, Dalip Kaur Tiwana, the representative Punjabi novelist and a contemporary of Maitreyi Pushpa depicts woman as a mere "victim" of patriarchy, her counterpart in the Hindi belt picks up her protagonists as "victims" but, then, she propels them on a path of struggle to emerge as "survivors" and sometimes as "victors". They are such women who refuse to become puppets and with a rare confidence and grit carve out their own destinies.
Notes and References


   All subsequent references are from this edition of the text. The English translation of the textual quotes and quotations from Hindi Journals and Magazines has been done by the researcher.


3. Vashishta, *Feminism* 131


7. अनाथलिंग स्त्रियों द्वारा दुर्गानां विवृति हि ततः। महाभारत, I 172, 12

8. पिता रक्षि कौमारे भर्ता रक्षि यथैः।
   रक्षित स्थिवरे पुत्रा न भजेत्यं भवत्तुत्तम।। Manusmriti IX, 3-4

9. रक्षेत्रण्यं पिता विनानं पति: पुत्रस्वार्धकेः।
   अभावे ज्ञात्यस्वेव न ज्ञातात्यविस्तितस्य।। Yajnavalkya Smriti I, 85


11. *Kisan-Kanhai* refers to Lord Krishna, particularly in folk literature and folk songs.


15. *Homkunda* literally means a hole which receives oblations in a yajna.

17. *Saptapadi* literally means 'seven steps' symbolically taken during the
marriage ceremony which unites the couple in a sacrosanct union.

18. *Veerangana Luxumibai*, the Rani of Jhansi, appears to be the most
celebrated *veerangana* (valourous woman) of Indian history.

19. Rajan Mahan, "Unveiling the Valours: An Exploration of the
Veerangana Image", *Women Images* eds. Pratibha Jain and Rajan


22. *Mirasin*, a female member of a Muslim community of professional
folk singers and dancers.

23. Maitreyi Pushpa, "Chaukhaton Se Bahar", *Katha Kram*, November
1998.

24. Prem Kumar Mani, "Yeh Jo Kuchh hai Woh Mera Nahin", *Hans*,
August 1994, 6.


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English translation of the textual quotes as well as the quotations
from Hindi journals and magazines has been done by the researcher.

27. Anita Vashishta, "In-between: Locating Tradition and Modernity in
the Works of Maitreyi Pushpa", *Feminism, Tradition and Modernity*, ed.
Chandra Kala Padia (Shimla: IIAS, 2002) 129.

28. The *Purusharthas*: These are the four fold objectives of human life-
*Kama* (enjoyment), *Artha* (Wealth), *Dharma* (ethical living) and *Moksa*
(spiritual freedom).

29. *Bichhia*, The Toe Ring : A ring worn on the big toe by married
women.

30. *Anuloma* and *Pratiloma* Marriages are marriages of males of higher
castes with females of lower castes and females of higher castes with
males of lower castes respectively. Whereas *anuloma* marriages were
quite common, *pratiloma* marriages were vehemently condemned.
31. *Varna* refers to the classical division of society under *Varnavyavastha* into four major classes—*Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Sudra*.


34. *Golap ke Swabhav* 106.


38. Vashishta, *Redefining Feminine Space* 171


40. *Ardhanariswar*: a form of God Shiva (half male and half female)

41. *Chaak* 117.


44. Gargi; She was the wife of Sage Yajnavalkya belonging to the Upanisadic age and is known for her scholarship.

45. *Grihalakshimi* : the lady of the house seen as the source of its prosperity.

46. *Grihasthi*: The order or stage of life of a house holder.

47. *Kali*: Title of the goddess as an incarnation of *Sakti* or power.

48. *Bhawani*; Parvati, wife of Shiva.

49. *Durga* : the goddess, consort of Shiva.