by the author are studied. The final chapter recapitulates the modes of exploration informed by feminist theory and sums up the findings of the research.

**Chapter – II**

**DISINTEGRATION OF INSTITUTIONS:**

**A REQUIEM FOR ORDER AND DISCIPLINE**

The Re-Vision that is considered to be a major aspect of women’s writing of modern times has included in its purview, various aspects of life and literature. All manner of institutions, social, political, cultural, economic and religious have come in for a critical re-vision. Society with all its different institutions has been a patriarchal construct, all through the years of human development. Woman, the rightful heir to “half the sky,” has had little or no contribution to make to the framework of these institutions. Some of them like family and motherhood are open instruments of women’s oppression and others by their manner and method of conception which did not include women’s say become on the whole, symbols of patriarchal politics and bigotry.

“Institutions establish orderliness, rules, sameness: feminism questions whether that orderliness and sameness has been at the expense of the difference represented by women” (Herndl 3). As people, who had themselves been excluded from and oppressed by educational, religious and governmental institutions, feminists try to understand how oppression has become
institutionalized, how it functions and how it could be changed. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English’s *Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness* studies the medical establishment and its complicity with sexist norms. Phyllis Chesler’s *Women and Madness* attempts a similar study in the practice of psychiatry. Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering* and Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born* study sexist norms in child raising, family structures and the construction of compulsory heterosexuality. Mary Daly’s *Beyond God the Father* and *The Church and the Second Sex* question the institutional sexism of religion. Feminist literary criticism has also been a part of this challenge, questioning the basic institutions of literary studies.

In *Modern Marriage and How to Bear It*, Maud Braby discusses the impact of Ibsen and Meredith’s works on attitudes to marriage and quotes Tolstoy’s view that, “The relationships between the sexes are searching for a new form, the old one is falling to pieces” (qtd. in Dyhouse, “Marital” 147). Feminist writings of the 1880s and 1890s are explicit in rejecting what they have identified as the traditional concept of marriage, which demands strength in a husband and frailty and deference in a wife. Harriet Taylor argues in an article in the *Westminster Review* that weakness, cowardice and ignorance cannot at once constitute the perfection of womankind and the imperfection of mankind. She states that it is necessary to instruct girls otherwise. Endorsing this view, Mrs. Annie Besant declares, “It is time to do away with the oak and ivy ideal and to teach each plant to grow strong and self supporting” (Dyhouse, “Marital” 149). She opines that
though dependence might look touching in an infant, because of its helplessness, it looks revolting in a grown man or woman, because with maturity should come, the dignity of self-support. An observation of similar tone, in Edward Carpenter’s *Love’s Coming of Age* would be appropriate here:

The frail and delicate female is supposed to cling round the sturdy husband’s form, or to depend from his arm in graceful incapacity; and the spectator is called upon to admire the charming effect of the union- as of the ivy with the oak- forgetful of the terrible moral, namely, that it is really a death-struggle which is going on, in which either the oak must perish suffocated in the embrace of its partner, or in order to free the former into anything like healthy development, the ivy must be sacrificed. (Dyhouse, “Marital” 149)

Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet make the observation that images of the perfect couple are everywhere around us, in pictures, sales promotions, advertisements, etc. “They are heterosexual. He is taller, bigger and darker than her. They usually appear in poses in which he looks straight ahead, confident and direct; she looks down or off into the distance, often dreamily. Standing or sitting, she is lower than him, maybe leaning on him, maybe tucked under his arm, maybe looking up to him.”(28) These images become instruments of socio-psychological compulsion, to such an extent that Eckert points out that from the time they are very young, most kids learn to desire that perfectly matched partner of the opposite sex.
Girls develop a desire to look up at a boyfriend. A girl begins to see herself leaning against his shoulder, as he leans down to kiss her or to whisper in her ear. She learns to be scared so he can protect her; she learns to cry so he can dry her tears. Connell observes that “this concentration of desire or *cathexis* is an extraordinarily powerful force in the maintenance of the gender order” (qtd. in Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 28). It is seen that patriarchal tradition has espoused certain images and the images have become so much a part of society that it perpetrates the images and passes them on. The images in turn reinforce patriarchy and the roles and models prescribed by it. It becomes a vicious circle. Women are both victims and accomplices in the perpetration.

Romance and marriage along with motherhood have been painted in rosy hues, down the centuries by men, so that men can have women stay where, men want them to stay-at home, and that too with a cleverly induced sense in women of not only doing the right thing but also being completely contented and happy about it. With the awakening of feminist thought and awareness of women’s sadly circumscribed state came, a re-evaluation of marriage and even its rejection by some.

Nightingale observes that some women reject the idea of marrying because they calculate that the costs of family life in terms of its erosion of personal autonomy for women are too great. She announces: “Some few sacrifice marriage because they sacrifice all other life if they accept that” (qtd. in Dyhouse, “Women” 10). Images of confinement, claustrophobia and belittlement abound in
feminist discourse on family life. Women’s frustrations with family life are clearly reflected in the use of imagery and metaphor in their writing. Home is frequently depicted as a prison or a cage, even if gilded or upholstered, where young fledglings have their wings clipped, as it were, against flight.

Florence Nightingale sees the social construction of femininity in the family as a process of stunting a young girl’s autonomy in a process similar to footbinding. Charlotte Perkins Gilman announces that marriage circumscribes the world of a woman. She says, “The man needs the wife and has her-needs the world and has it. The woman needs the husband, and has him; needs the world-and there is the husband instead. He stands between her and the world… a poor substitute for full human life” (21).

Simone de Beauvoir also states that marriages are not all generally founded upon love. She quotes Freud: “The husband is, so to speak never more than a substitute for the beloved man, not that man himself” (453). Beauvoir points out that this dissociation is not accidental. It is implied in the very nature of the institution, the aim of which is to make the economic and sexual union of man and woman serve the interest of society, not assure their personal happiness. “The truth is that just as biologically males and females are not victims of one another but both victims of the species, so man and wife together undergo the oppression of an institution, they did not create” (500).

In the patriarchal order of things, woman is supported by man, like a parasite. Men feel indignant, when they are accused of oppressing women. They
argue that it is the other way round. Regarding this complaint, Beauvoir puts forward the argument that woman makes a weapon of her weakness and seeks desperately to bend him to her will because her interests as an individual lie in him. So it is for the common welfare of men and women that the situation must be altered by prohibiting marriage as a career for women. What Beauvoir said more than a century ago is still largely relevant to the women of today, particularly in developing countries like India. Marriage, romance and motherhood are still looked upon as the be-all and by-all of women’s existence, with everything else taking a second place.

Githa Hariharan’s novels question the validity, sanctity of institutions. The oldest and most sacred to patriarchy is the family and that is the one that comes most under minute scrutiny. It is held up and exposed in its sham. Scenes of conjugal bliss and tender family attachments are almost not there in her writing. It is not that she rules out family as an option for life and its carriage. In fact she wants to make just that point. It is an option, a choice among others available in life. It is not the be-all and end-all of life as writers and patriarchal custodians of society have had us believe. Going further in this trend, as already discussed in the previous chapter, there are a tenderly delineated sister-sister bonding, mother-daughter bonding, male-male boding and even a female-female bonding with sexual complications, presented as valid alternatives to the male-female bond, in the four novels taken for study.
The average Indian woman is inculcated with the ideas of martyrdom, of pride in patience, of the need to accept a lower status through the mythical models of Sita, Savitri, Gandhari etc. But Githa Hariharan employs these characters and a whole lot of other characters from well-known stories and recasts them with minds of their own. She fills the gaps in their depiction in legends with minds that reason, argue, speak for themselves. For instance, in *The Thousand Faces of Night*, a series of marriages are presented as samples of the different kinds of fate that await women in the name of marriage, when Devi’s marriage plans are underway. As Premila Paul observes, *The Thousand Faces of Night* presents “the effects of patriarchy on women of different social classes and ages and particularly the varied responses to the restrictive institution of marriage” (108).

Devi’s memories of the stories, her grandmother had presented to her as commentary or criticism on different happenings around her, assail her with visions of different marriages from myths and legends. Gandhari has traditionally been looked upon as the model of devoted wifehood as according to the legend, she blindfolds herself, after knowing that her husband is blind. Githa Hariharan however enables a new perspective on the legend through Devi’s grandmother. Grandmother presents to Devi, a vision of the shy and eager young bride who comes to the palace to see her new husband. The vacuous white of her husband’s eyes shock her into a fury at having been taken for granted. She tears her sari in a fit of controlled white hot fury and blindfolds herself in a tight bind of self denial.
Grandmother presents this story when Devi questions her about an old forgotten photograph showing her mother Sita with a veena in her hand. Grandmother’s juxtaposition of Gandhari’s blindfold and Sita’s tearing of the strings of her veena suggests that both are acts of the same kind of suppressed rage at the weight of prescribed roles and societal pressure within the institution of marriage. Sita as a young girl had been devoted to her veena. She was capable of producing such divine music, that people tended to forget themselves, while listening to her. As a young bride in her husband’s home, one morning, she is so engrossed in her music, that she is not conscious of the passage of time. Her sojourn into the realms of music is rudely disturbed, when her father-in-law’s angry voice questions her whether she is a wife, a daughter-in-law.

Sita, like most other women has absorbed patriarchal values so deeply, that the pressure in her to conform to roles is deep. She doesn’t question why, her playing of the veena should be incompatible with her role as wife and daughter-in-law in the family. In a fit of suppressed fury akin to Gandhari’s, she tears down the strings of her veena. Here, Gandhari is seen through Gita Hariharan’s eyes. Seething fury, rather than devotion and submission is seen in the princess who meets her blind husband. The blindfold is a concrete symbol of all the rage and hatred that Gandhari bottles and locks up in her self. Sita’s self-denial in ripping apart the strings of her veena is a similar act of suppression of fury that is turned inward, tightly bundled up and shoved inside.
The story of the marriage between a snake and a woman is presented as a foil for the maid Gauri’s love marriage with an albino after her earlier failed marriage. For Amba from the legends, marriage turns out to be an unfulfilled dream. In the name of patriarchy defined rules of male power of possession over women and bigoted visions of chastity, Amba is denied her rights as an individual and is bandied about between the King of Salwa, whom she wanted to marry and Bhishma, who had claimed her by force to be married to his brother. Amba’s story is narrated by grandmother, when Devi asks her a question about her cousin Uma’s failed marriage. Devi had seen Uma exchanging romantic glances with her husband, soon after their wedding. But, the jubilant Uma, who goes to her husband’s home returns within a month, crushed and broken as her drunken father-in-law had tried to kiss her on her lips.

A vision of Damayanti’s marriage with Nala along with her preparation for the ‘swayamwara’ is presented when Devi is about to be married. Here it is as if the disappointment that Devi is going to face within the institution of marriage is hinted at in the story. According to the legends, though Damayanti loves Nala and marries him, Sani’s influence in the form of a serpent bite transforms Nala and she is unable to recognize her own husband. Nala leaves Damayanti. When the date of her wedding is nearing, Devi is suddenly filled with horror at the prospect of sharing her nights and days with a complete stranger. The comfortable routines, rituals and customary gathering of hordes of relatives lull her into a false sense of security. But within a few weeks of her marriage, Devi has a sense of
imprisonment. She thinks that marriage should be allowed to grow gradually like a tender sapling growing into a plant. Mahesh however seems to make no attempts to gradually know or understand her.

Mahesh seems to take it for granted that Devi would fulfill her destined role. When she dreams of “bodies tearing away in passion at night” (*TFN* 74), he expresses his satisfaction at the fact that Indians do not seem to be obsessed with love. His business like attitude and his refusal to recognize her as an individual is a form of silent cruelty to Devi. She thinks of the “vast yawning chapters of her womanhood” (54) with despair. Marriage is a sacrificial knife, in Devi’s eyes. It is something that hangs over a girl’s neck. It had hung over Devi’s neck for years. Now, it had reached her, touched her. But it does not plunge in, tear her, rip her apart. Instead it draws a drop at a time. In yet another place, the married state is pictured as a prison, which restricts her movement. “That night, I dreamt of flying again. I flew swiftly, the globe of green and brown and blue maps whizzing past far below. I flew into a castle and when my feet touched the ramparts, I could fly no more” (57). Devi thinks of Mahesh, as an accomplice to her mother Sita. Sita had in her clinical, precise way tried to dictate the way, her father and she lived. Now Mahesh is assigning roles to her. “I woke up, than slipped back into the dream mid-air, only to find myself in the clutches of an accomplice, his open robes revealing a cruelly bare, smooth, irony chest” (58). There is a strong impression of the stifling and confinement that feminists talk about, in Devi’s description of her marriage.
Devi makes attempts to become a part of Mahesh’s life-to know about his office work and to join him in his card game. But she finds grey, impenetrable walls all round her husband. He is so casual, the casualness bordering on indifference that Devi wants to cry out that it is too early for quietness, too soon for the companionship of habit. The only source of warmth in the household is her father-in-law, Baba with his own collection of stories defining the limits of wifehood. She in fact feels closer to her father-in-law than to her husband. Baba’s death grieves her, weighing her down with an acute sense of loss and betrayal. Mahesh seems incapable of understanding her loss, her loneliness, her futile attempts at forging a relationship with him. It is not as if Mahesh is a pervert or a wife-beater. He is even-tempered but an inward movement of his lips is enough to proclaim his disapproval. And his disapproval is ‘a cunning cord’ round Devi’s vulnerable neck.

In Hindu mythology, while Hindu Goddesses have many names and forms, they are thought of as ultimately identifiable with a unified female deity often referred to simply as Devi, the Goddess. And it is not by accident that the protagonist Devi gets married to Mahesh, which is one of the many names of God Shiva. Myth says that Devi’s destructive rage expressed through the form of Kali, becomes channelled, controlled only within the constraints of marriage to Shiva. Her power is then supposedly directed towards the establishment of order and well-being. She is responsible not only for defeating the forces of disorder but also for promoting creativity and fertility. Here the message that comes across is that
marriage is very necessary to channelise the energy of a woman. But ironically in *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Devi finds herself losing all semblance of life and energy after her marriage to Mahesh. She feels exactly like the grotesque, stuffed bird kept as the model in Tara’s painting classes. There is no life inside, only the trappings are real.

Mayamma, the old retainer in the house senses the grief of the thin, wispy figure. The dark rooms in the household seem to reek of Devi’s tears. Her rights, emotions as an individual don’t have a place in Mahesh’s world. His calculated planning, his cold, passionless approach to their relationship in marriage and the way he silently blames her for not getting pregnant, wound her. And then, it is just one wound, too many.

Devi leaves home with Gopal, seeking a new release in his music. But disillusionment sets in soon in the new relationship too as Devi realizes that Gopal is incapable of seeing beyond himself and his music. When Devi realizes that Gopal makes use of his women like props to further his various interests, she decides to leave. She decides that marriage is one hellish process of walking the tightrope and she doesn’t want any more of it. She returns to her mother and the novel ends on a promising note of a new future for both of them, where they would try to find new meanings in their lives on their own terms, without any compromise, forced by marriage.

Sita’s decision to discard the veena soon after her marriage is an act of both vengeance and denial. The loss of her veena, which she could manipulate and
control, signifies the loss of her autonomy. Sita gives up her veena but chooses the jasmine creeper, the bonsai trees, Mahadevan and Devi as her new playthings, which would be pliant to her manipulation. The jasmine climber that is carefully guided along rails and not allowed to follow its natural instincts to climb and the bonsai trees that are pruned and kept under tight control are expressions of Sita’s need for power.

Sita sits through the night in the kitchen, poring over her account books and directing her husband’s life in the path of financial success. She takes her husband by the hand and leads him from promotion to promotion. Ever efficient and methodical, her parties are a delight, perfect down to the ‘pedas.’ Her garden is a well ordered one, with the jasmine creepers trained and guided to grow horizontally, instead of up, as is their wont. She is also the proud owner of six bonsai trees, cut and trimmed and kept luxuriant within the defined limits, all under the able eyes of Sita. Her urge for self expression that had been repressed by the tight bind of self denial, finds false fulfillment in various positions of power that she assumes in the lives of people and inanimate objects around her. “Sita could and did rule with an iron hand. She thought for all three of them; and when she could do so without offending propriety, she acted for them, swiftly, decisively and above all unobtrusively” (TFN 105). But Mahadevan finds Sita’s domination and methodical planning oppressive. He moves from success to success but also from dreaminess to more dreams. There is no real marital sharing
between Sita and Mahadevan. It is a case of the oppressor and the oppressed. Devi and Mahadevan are accomplices in mutiny against the iron rule of Sita’s hand.

Mahadevan’s rebellion shows itself in his attraction for Annapurna and growing alienation with Sita. Sita’s watchful eye however does the nipping act. Annapurna is sent to another relative’s home and the journey of success is resumed. But the sense of alienation is complete. Here it is Sita, who has not tried to respond to the individual mind of Mahadevan. She had already forced him to choose financial success in preference to his passion for folklore. Mahadevan gradually becomes more and more silent. Spent and tried as all his little mutinies get quelled by Sita’s iron hand, “Mahadevan dies alone in his fifties, stingy and evasive to the end” (106). Devi wonders whether her father had remembered luscious Annapurna as the pain had locked his heart. Here it is clear that Devi herself is conscious of the mechanical relationship between her father and mother. Sita had internalized the oppression that the family setup and her father-in-law’s vision of a woman’s role had inflicted on her and had redirected the oppression on her husband and daughter.

Sita’s attempt at domination of her husband and daughter is described as “a surreptitious usurping of power. It is the recognition of the latent importance of the seemingly powerless position that enables her to subvert the assigned role and emerge as the head of the family” (Paul 112). Sita’s return to her veena, towards the end of the novel is an important gesture. It marks the end of her need for surrogate power. The false sense of power and its futility which had driven both
husband and daughter away from her is brought home to her by Devi’s rejection of the marriage, she had so fondly and ingenuously arranged for her. Sita takes a step towards finding herself in the natural overgrowth that she has now allowed in her garden, in her return to the veena, in her calm waiting for her daughter. It also seems to signify that Sita has acknowledged the reduction and restriction, marriage forces so often upon a woman, and is now ready to accept Devi’s right to live life in her own way and on her own terms.

Mayamma, the other major character in the novel is given in marriage when she is only twelve years old. Manu says: “A woman is not a free individual in her own right. First she is the property of her father, then she is the property of her husband- then she is in the control of her son” (qtd. in Alladi Uma 2). So Mayamma is handed over by her father into another family. For Mayamma, family turns out to be a site of oppression, belittlement and unhappiness. Mayamma’s mother-in-law forces her to stay up and press her feet till late into the night before sending her up to sleep with her husband. Their union in the nights serves no purpose other than falling in with the societal prescription to strive for an heir to the family. There are no moments of tenderness, understanding or companionship. The justification for her place in the new household is the dowry in the form of jewels that she brings and the sons that her horoscope promises she would bear; the mother in-law views the situation as such and watches Mayamma’s slim waist with growing impatience.
Women are both unconscious accomplices and victims in the victimization. They themselves have absorbed the patriarchal compulsions and become accomplices in the perpetration of such rules and systems as would ensure the continuance of it all. Mayamma’s mother-in-law forces her to do penance. “Mayamma welcomed her penance like an old friend. What else would keep the roving eye still?” (TFN 80). As a Negro woman is doubly wronged, as are women in similar economically deprived circumstances, Mayamma is doubly wronged by society. It is seen here that Mayamma’s husband doesn’t do any penance for the sake of getting an heir for the family. He just continues with his “pushing, pushing in the dark.” Women are always expected to be patient, bear pain and never ask questions, Sita does not question why, she cannot be a good wife or daughter-in-law, if she practises her music and forgets herself in it on occasions. Devi does not question why Mahesh should decide what she did with her free time, why she cannot be accepted for herself, why Mahesh did not honour his marriage vows in their real spirit.

Mayamma accepts, and survives within the role assigned to her. It is ironic that, marriage, which Mayamma’s father had arranged for her as she needed it for her protection, does not give her any protection. The only moments of happiness that Mayamma cherishes in her memories are the stolen moments of respite from housework, she had enjoyed, with the sandalwood fan gifted to her by her fond cousin, pressed against her cheek. The cousin had cared about her and he had fought for the country in far-off lands and died. In the end, after her drunken
husband’s death and wastrel son’s death, it is Mayamma’s hard work that feeds her mother-in-law in her last days. And security and protection, she finds at last outside the institution of marriage, only through her own labour in Mahesh’s household.

One more failed marriage in the novel that puts across a strong message is that between Parvatiamma and Baba. Parvatiamma rebels at the limits that her soft-spoken husband sets on wifehood and the roles of a woman. She chafes at being the mere shadow of her husband, even though it is spiritual fulfillment that she seeks. She leaves home in search of an independent salvation for herself, not ready to accept the word of the scriptures which say that a woman need do no individual penance and that in serving her husband, she rises to heaven.

The reader gets to see the ideal man, woman relationship in Devi’s dreams. She dreams of a woman who grows strong, powerful and capable. The blood red coloured, radiant fruit that she bites into, the juice of which flows down her chin is clearly a symbol of passion. She gets trained in archery and all techniques of fighting. She looks after her people with efficient ease. She meets a woodland youth, strong-limbed and supple. He is also wise because of his isolation from other men. He falls at her feet and calls her his goddess. They live as perfect companions, each ready to take the other’s load, bearing sons and daughters in their ten year long life together. Theirs is a full life, wholly satisfying. The reader doesn’t find any samples of such satisfying, equally founded heterosexual relationships, in any of the four novels, taken for study. But there are such similar
satisfying relationships between Jameela and Mangala, Devi and her grandmother, Vasu Master and Mani, Dilshad and Dunyazad, and between Devi and her mother, Sita.

The female-female bond between Devi and her grandmother is a special one: “My grandmother’s lap was soft and she murmured gently like a little brown and yellow bird, but the bony thighs I felt through her soft sari were as warm and solid as the afternoon-baked earth below me. Her pallav covered my face, enclosing it in a silken refuge” (*TFN* 18). The physical, psychological and emotional intimacy that comes through beautifully in this passage illustrates the close bond between Devi and her grandmother. Reena Kothari observes that the closeness “provides the tempo and tenor for Devi’s initiation into the world of women” (44) that Devi’s grandmother presents through her stories.

Through the world of myth and story that grandmother presents to Devi, the bond extends to and connects a whole large world of women. As Vijaysree points out, the world of imagination connects Devi to an ancestral matristic vision of the world. “It establishes a female rite of passage, in which Devi comes to acquire knowledge of women’s power that could set enormous transformations to work in individual life and in the world” (179).

Devi has a deeply affectionate relationship with her mother, even if it is not an overtly sentimental one. Even though she is conscious of her mother’s domination, and she has her little mutinies, an over riding love is dominant. Devi speaks thus of the sense of security, she feels on returning to her mother’s home
after her stay in America: “In this fortress that shuts out the rest of the world, I
grope towards her, and she weaves a cocoon, a secure womb that sucks me in and
holds me fast to its thick, sticky walls” (TFN 13). She further thinks of both of
them as a one-celled unit. While on the point of leaving Gopal’s house, she thinks
of her mother, Sita and the patriarchal standards of worth, which she had adopted
in the place of her veena and maybe other cherished dreams. Thoughts of the
lonely battle Sita must have fought in trying to measure herself against worldly
indices, and the yawning loneliness that filled her life now, fill Devi with remorse.
She pictures Sita’s hand held out to her in mute supplication. She decides that she
would go back to her mother, and start her life afresh.

The dimensions of the relationship between Devi and her mother undergo a
subtle transformation, as the novel moves to its end. In the beginning of the novel,
Devi is conscious of the invisible strings in her mother’s hand that control and
direct Devi’s life. Towards the end, however, with a new understanding gained
with the evolution of her character, Devi sees the vulnerability and pain in Sita.
Now Devi and Sita are equals, no longer the ‘dominating’ and the ‘dominated’.
The new relationship that Devi envisions between her mother and herself, would
be on an equal footing. There would be love and understanding, but no
compulsions and domination. Devi’s arrival at Sita’s house thus marks a new
beginning for them both. It is also a significant mark of protest against the
overriding importance given to marriage and similar heterosexual relationships in
the carriage of life.
The family structures based on heterosexual bonding receive a conspicuously negative stress in *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*. Vasu Master’s wife Mangala is dead and finds a presence only in his reminiscences. The whole novel hinges on the subtle relationship that unfolds between Vasu Master and Mani. Although they had had two sons Vishnu and Venu, Vasu master knows Mangala more as a cloudy memory than as a person. She had remained obscurely in the background all through their life together. That there had been only place for the mundane everyday necessities in their life, that there had been no loving understanding or communication between them is clearly understood in the lines: “the Mangala I recalled was pale and insubstantial, a figure perennially on the retreat. I already saw her in my mind against a vast seashore in the background, the monotonous slosh and thud of waves against rock and sand drowning out all possibility of words” (41).

An aura of silence seems to hang about Mangala, whom the reader gets to see in Vasu Master’s memories. Vasu Master says that she rarely looks up to meet his eyes. It is therefore as if it were a new Mangala who interacts with her childhood friend, Jameela. Animated voices mingling with double scaled laughter mark the occasions of Jameela’s arrival at their home. Watching them together, Vasu Master has the distinct impression that they make up the perfect pair, team or couple – the earthy and the ethereal, cocoon and butterfly. Mangala remains elusive, obscure to Vasu Master, even after her death. As he acknowledges, he knows her only by her absence. All through their life, Mangala, like the elusive
Eliamama, who keeps wandering the shores in the hope that one day someone would see her at least briefly, had not enjoyed a fulfilling kind of relationship with her husband.

Indeed there is more of single sex bonding in the novel. The bond between Mangala and Jameela on one hand is so deep that Vasu Master sees them as two complementary pieces of the perfect pair. The landscapes that Mangala embroiders in her little pieces of cloth are always of the sea. Yet, she refuses to get into the sea when her husband and children invite her in during a holiday trip to Mahabalipuram. Her gaze is often an absent gaze that looks out into the distant horizon. A painful sense of nostalgia and loss seem to fill her always with regard to the childhood joy she had experienced, in the company of Jameela. She comes alive only in the presence of Jameela.

The other predominant relationship in the novel which informs the whole novel with a touching emotional intimacy is of the special bond between Vasu Master and Mani. Vasu Master finds new meanings and purpose in his life, after the entry of Mani into it. The relationship is so special to Vasu Master, that he says of his first meeting with Mani: “Like a lover, who will never forget the first time he set eyes on his beloved, I recall Mani, the first time we were in my room alone together” (11).

The importance of heterosexual love as the centre point of social and community life is played down in all the four novels but almost to the point of complete exclusion of such interludes in The Ghosts of Vasu Master. There is just
the suggestion of a heady infatuation on Vasu’s part for Mangala’s friend, Jameela, with her buxom appearance and full-throated laughter. Jayaprakash A. Shinde traces Vasu Master’s brief, unexpressed fascination towards Jameela’s attractions to the kind of giddy passion that the actress Rita-Mona’s scantily dressed image covering three-fourths of the calendar in his father’s room had inspired in him, in his green years of young boyhood. It is also a pointer to the fact that the male gaze primarily images women as objects of pleasure. Vasu Master, steeped in patriarchal notions also has this view of women, ingrained in him in the beginning.

If Jameela appears in his eyes as an object of pleasure, Mangala appears only as an object of convenience and use. He has not learnt to look beyond these twin images, to the real woman, a fellow human-being, a companion who would like to share his world with him on equal terms. His concept of morals and way of life do not permit Vasu Master to pursue his fascination for Jameela, even after Mangala’s death and in spite of the gentle overtures of the widowed Jameela. He keeps his face averted, when Jameela comes to return the embroidered pieces of cloth and to say a final good-bye to him because she is leaving the town.

Vasu Master’s strongest emotion for Mangala is one of smouldering regret and guilt that he had not tried to understand her, when she was alive. Mangala remains a shadowy presence in the background throughout the novel. Vasu Master opens the tin trunk that holds her little treasures intact but the old photographs, with images of himself, Mangala and the boys, their wedding invitations and odd
articles of Mangala’s silver do not kindle any emotion in him whatsoever other than a profound sense of loss and regret, because he had not understood her.

The narrative within narrative, the whole of the multi layered structure in *When Dreams Travel* presents a disintegration of and disillusionment with, a host of institutions. The most dominant relationship that supersedes any of the myriad weavings and interweavings of human relationships in the narrative is the sisterhood that joins Shahrzad and Dunyazad not as blood relatives alone but as accomplices in a battle of blood. But family and all that is affectionate and holy in the family set up end just there. The notion of family with fidelity, trust, affection and commitment is falsified, thwarted, right from the beginning. Shahryar’s wife indulges in sexual orgies in his own palace, minutes after he leaves the palace for his hunting pursuits. Shah Zaman, his brother too has the doubtful satisfaction of catching his wife literally in the act of having sex with a black slave.

Shah Zaman cuts the pair in half and is filled with such a sense of betrayal and anger that he has no peace till he finds that his brother is also in the same unenviable predicament. The jinn’s wife who has her jinn husband sleeping on her lap yet through gestures and threats manages to force the two brothers to have sex with her, fills them with a kind of perverse satisfaction that they are not alone in their cuckoldry. Shahryar in fact feels so relieved that he pounces back on women and the institution of marriage with a vengeance. He quietly disposes of his wife and the offending slaves and starts on a train of marriages – a marriage every day,
consummation every night and a beheading of the bride, the next day – a marriage, every day, just to ensure that he got a virgin for his wife every night.

Marriage is stripped of even the pretensions to a decent relationship between a man and a woman. Marriage is an excuse and a ticket for the act of sex not with a willing partner but on a helpless victim. Shahrzad becomes the willing martyr when the number of virgins in the city dwindles. The farce of a marriage takes place. As the marriage bed is made ready, the shroud also is ready. But Shahrzad talks her way through the night and gains one day at a time with her stories. Three children and a thousand nights later, she is still the victim balanced on the sword edge. She is not a wife to Shahryar in any other sense than through sex.

Only after the thousand and one nights, the king graciously pardons Shahrzad and accepts her as his wife. To celebrate the occasion when the would-be martyr turns saviour, there is the need for a wedding. Dunyazad is given in marriage to Shah Zaman. But the wounded ego of Shahzaman has but superficially healed and is not ready for companionable partnership. He is obsessed with darkness and suspicion and roams the dark nights. Intrigue and betrayal, suspicion and fickleness mark the conjugal relationships spattered around in the novel. The bonding between Dunyazad and Shahrzad is closer than between Shahrzad and Shahryar or between Dunyazad and Shahzaman for that matter. Shahrzad and Dunyazad find it difficult to remember their mother. She is the shadowy character
who doesn’t have a presence in her home and the novel. She is powerless to question the kind of fate that the Wazir conjures up for their eldest daughter.

There is almost no real conjugal attachment in any married couple portrayed in *When Dreams Travel*. Shahryar’s and Shahrzad’s marriage is balanced on a knife’s edge in the early years: a knife openly hanging over Shahrzad’s head, and an equally lethal knife aimed at Shahryar, ever ready to strike and well concealed in the folds of Dunyazad’s dress.

It is outside marriage, with the traveller Abdullah, a young merchant and a stranger in their lands that Shahrzad sheds her burden, her age and finds true love In her mind’s eye, “Dunyazad sees Shahrzad, a girl for the first time though she is mother, three times over, discover what it is to love without terror” (97). After her famous, courageous redemption of the Sultan, Shahrzad’s nights are spent in the isolation of her harem, most of the time. Her one act of trespassing is in the passionate interlude with Abdullah: “the two, Shahrzad and her lover, fight a battle as it is meant to be fought, their only armour, frailty, the generosity of their nakedness” (97). Dunyazad and hence the author feels that language is inadequate to express the beauty of the passion and love that consume the couple. Dunyazad’s face glows with pleasure in knowing about the fulfillment, her sister had found. The act however becomes the cause of her removal from the royal palace. It is announced that the sultana Shahrzad had died of a strange illness.

The other true lasting bonds of affection are between Dunyazad and Shahrzad, Satyasama and Dilshad and again between Dilshad and Dunyazad.
“There are very few secrets between them” (130), the narrator says of Shahrzad and her sister. When Shahryar speaks more of the marble memorial he is going to build in memory of Shahrzad than of Shahrzad herself, Dunyazad finds it hard to contain her anger. What Shahryar puts forth as a question, softly to Dunyazad, as she is mulling over her sister’s sudden illness and death, “Can love and loyalty ever be together, I wonder?” (62) is a significant comment on the heterosexual relationships in the novel.

Where the happy family scene is conspicuously absent in all the four novels, in *In Times of Siege*, Shiv’s wife is an in absentia partner in the whole of the novel. Rekha is the symbol of competence, “her sari and hair firmly held in place with an assortment of pins” (172). And in Shiv’s mental image, Rekha has the look of a tourist who has overstayed in a small, boring place. Rekha’s face says she has seen everything, there is to see. She has seen through Shiv. They have exhausted emotion and all that remains is “habit”.

The kind of communion, perfect union that Basava talks about between a man and a woman is possible for Shiv only with someone outside his bond of marriage – with Meena, whose hair hangs loose and curls cascade down her cheeks. “If a man and a woman really look at each other, a union is born, a union fit to unite with the lord of the meeting rivers” (179). The fifteen minutes of physical communication - it is rather that more than contact that night when Shiv and Meena are alone in the house with no maid as chaperone, when the atmosphere is a heady mixture of danger, excitement, anger, fear and a strange
urge to keep going, when Shiv feels that “he is on the edge of more than one precipice” (175) both in his personal sphere and professional sphere. Yet that is enough to forge a special, deep relationship between them in which at least on Shiv’s part there is no need for a verbal commitment. “It is surprising how little the details matter. He has the sense that they have given each other something that is for all its namelessness more solid and immovable than actual physical love”(178). In spite of the brevity of the interlude and the disturbances caused by the buzzing mosquito and the arrival of the security guard, Shiv feels contented and close to Meena: “And afterwards despite The Boogie-Woogie Show and Babyface, despite the return of his mind and its chaotic jumble, the astonishing sense of oneness” (178).

There is no shame or quick guilt characteristic of a cheap extra marital affair in the closeness between Shiv and Meena. Rather the easy understanding, and the instinctive concern and care speak of a deeper attachment that is often noticeable within the bounds of a loving marriage. He is most visibly disturbed as the junior doctor uses an electric drill ‘to saw through the coat up her thing”. He holds her hand and she allows him to rest it there. Earlier on her first visit to the hospital with Shiv, when they find that Meena is unable to rest her two feet on the footrest of the armchair, Shiv wouldn’t bear to entrust the cast leg in the care of the attendant. Instead he marches backward into the hospital, the raised leg in cast firmly in his hands as Meena follows in her armchair, her other leg resting on the footrest.
Method or system is considered a masculine trait and women who possess it are seen as threats or as encroachers in their male space. Men in Githa Hariharan’s novels seem to have an aversion for such method and system in their women. This aversion is in keeping with feminist philosophy. Nancy Armstrong points out: “If, as deconstruction suggests, masculinity of something is textually dependent on its lack of femininity, then it follows that a man should feel threatened by women who exercise masculine forms of power or by men who flaunt signs of femininity. Their excess is his lack” (107).

Rekha has the kind of “hungry look that wants to colonize as far as the eye can see, clear and rearrange spaces and lives” (ITS 58). She is dominating, methodical and organized in her ways and Shiv feels a need to seek escape in lunch time sexual escapades with his colleague, Amita. The attraction, Amita Sen holds for him is that, “if he has a few secret moments with her, he also has a dark and sordid corner in his neatly swept life, a place where nothing is labelled or put back in place- a corner, unsupervised by Rekha” (58).

Even Shiv’s attraction for Meena takes the eternal masculine protective garb. Meena’s leg is in cast and he rushes to support it, happily fitting into the role of knight errant. Where Rekha’s perfectly combed hair held in place by pins has repulsed him, Meena’s tumbling curls have a seductive attraction for him. Meena’s hair is always characteristically loose, awry, cascading in tendrils, down her cheeks. Shiv sees with clarity that Rekha knows him through and is bored. Where Rekha’s possible arrival fills him with a sense of security and relief from
immediate worries, Meena’s damp, dishevelled bedclothes intoxicate him even in the midst of the storm that is raging round him:

All the desire in the room – and there is so much of it, the air is thick with humidity – is concentrated in him. She must know something of it. She must see, even she must see that he is on the brink of more than one precipice – sense his ache for her, forever coupled in his mind with the fear of living with danger, choice, commitment. (175)

Meena and his strange communion with her inspire him with the courage to sustain his quasi heroic stance against the mindless fundamentalism and the resultant carnage around him.

As for other institutions, there is a breakdown of political institutions. Monarchy as a political institution is in utter chaos in *When Dreams Travel*. Monarchy invests the monarch with the status akin to that of divinity. A monarch is traditionally considered, the divine representative. He is father, the Lord to his subjects. The position not only marks rights but also responsibilities. But Shahryar, the ruler of Shahbad is bent upon nursing his private wounds to the exclusion of everything else. He cares not about the bloody trail that he would be accused of leaving. The Wazir warns him of just that possibility.

Shahryar doesn’t think twice about using his administrative machinery to ensure nights of romance with sweet revenge the day after in a suitable safe setting. The dungeons where the prisoners are housed and where horrible conditions would normally prevail are transformed to house the royal presence and
his virgin bride. The guilt that swamps the monarch in his last days is but a small measure of the monstrosity of his injustice to his subjects.

The loyalty that the subjects would feel towards their king is rightly absent as is clearly seen in samples here and there. On the day Prince Umar is born, Dunyazad is dressed and ready to meet Shahryar at night as his virgin bride. And she has a sword in the voluminous folds of her dress. She tells her sister who is even then trying to recover her energy sufficiently after child birth to go and meet Shahryar with her cliff hanger stories, that she, Dunyazad would make the sword speak that day. Now that Prince Umar was born, the future ruler of Shahbad, Shahryar was dispensable and her sword would see to him. It is Shahrzad who refuses to fall in with the plan because she doesn’t want to add more blood to the already bloody path.

As a child, Prince Umar notices that his father and mother are almost oblivious to the day-to-day happenings around them. ‘He’ is fiddling endlessly with his sword, his own understanding of a Sultan’s power and a box that dispenses wine, while ‘she’ is writing her stories with “a stick of gold on a basin of sand” (223). It is left to Prince Umar to see the world that is lying beyond the palace walls, the world that his father the great Shahryar and his mother, the great Sultana Shahrzad are impervious to. The author describes the image in Umar’s mind: “two figures, a man and a woman engaged in what appeared to be secret ritual. Outside their chamber was a babble of voices, some wailing in hunger or
despair, others storming at injustices piled up. The man and woman seemed to hear nothing of it” (222).

Young Umar asks Nadeem, the executioner about his city, the one in which people lead ordinary, humble lives. Nadeem leads the boy up to the palace roof and Umar has his first look at the disorderly city that spilt out of the walls of the palace. The boy in him feels even at that age, “the regular beat of its enduring heart and the quiet strength of its mundane life” (225). Though he had been reared on the splendours of the palace, on its over rich diet, when he comes face to face with the scarred city and its banal, daily, struggle for bread, he is moved to tears. Again after Shahrzad’s supposed death, Shahryar plans to build a monument that would eclipse all other monuments. He cares not about the poor peasants, labourers and the common men whose hard earned money he was going to use to cater to his ego. It is left to Prince Umar, when he is grown up to support sagging monarchy to its feet.

In Shah Zaman’s kingdom, it is a demented horror who is at the helm of affairs. For want of better things to be done, he bans rings in his kingdom, because he cannot bear to think of his ring lying as the hundredth in a string within the silken purse of a lustful creature. He also bans strings and purses. “A few disobedient fingers are chopped off in broad day light; in the dead of night, surprise attacks turn homes upside down” (194). The people of Samarkhand no longer have a routine. The Sultan’s adventures are filling up prisons. It is a picture of dark terror that presents itself as life under the rule of Shah Zaman.
Spies are the heroes of the kingdom. The network grows till they form a web of hardy weeds that threatens to choke the city. Spies infiltrate neighbourhoods, till all ties are broken and no man trusts the next man. And then the Sultan starts spying his own spies. As Shahbad had been cleaned of virgins once, now Shahzaman’s city is getting cleaned of people, men and women. Even to know women and blacks, slaves or free is reason enough for death and so the city has learnt to say lies. Then rumours are about, of an irrevocable breach between the Sultan and Dunyazad, and one day the Sultan is lost.

As Shahrzad had taken it upon herself to reverse the fate of Shahbad in her own original way, Dunyazad takes charge of Samarkhand. Dunyazad rules discreetly on behalf of her stepson who she has judged would be a better king than her imbecile son. She rules, Samarkhand heals. Dunyazad does not claim the title of Sultana. She remains Sayyida, the lady Dunyazad who briefly holds the reins for her predecessor’s child.

In *In Times of Siege*, anarchy is presented in two levels, one in the period when Kalyan burns, its legacy of a casteless community thrown over to the flames of communal riots and bigotry following the marriage of a cobber’s son with a Brahmin girl and the other in the wake of criticism of the booklet on medieval history that Shiv had prepared for his B.A. History students. Shiv’s room at the university is ransacked, books torn, shelves broken and along with the hate mail that pours in, poisonous threats to the safety of his wife and daughter in America filter in. There is a complete breakdown of political machinery in both levels.
Evidences of disenchantment with religion, as an institution are found in all the four novels, being considered. In *In Times of Siege*, the brass bell that Shiv’s mother had used for her fruitless pujas “is a wasted relic in his house that doesn’t pray” (9). Shiv tells his inquisitive daughter in her school days, “There is no God”. The fake religious fervour and pseudo culture that the non-resident Indians have adopted as a reaction against foreign culture and atmosphere come under subtle ironic criticism. Shiv’s daughter, Tara’s letters have just the right degree of artificiality to make their following, a parody of true religious involvement.

Again Shiv satirizes the way human beings are sanctified and made into saints or even demi-gods in the name of religion. It amounts to a glossing over of whatever they stood for, indeed, glorifying the husk instead of the grain. Shiv tries to present Basava, nugget-size to Meena. He presents him as a real person. Basava had firm principles and beliefs, for the propagation and establishment of which he devoted his whole life. Yet he also had a sensitive heart that broke down, not ready to face failure. Basava chose to give up his life once he saw his life’s handiwork going up literally in flames along with the city of Kalyan. Shiv believes that truth should be presented with all its multitudinous strands. So he refuses to present a glossed-over version of Basava’s life. He refuses to conform to the religious sentiments of fanatics who just cannot associate a human mind with doubts and grief, with the saintly Basava.

Through the various glimpses of Basava’s life that one gets to see, dispersed throughout the novel, the author brings out the fact that Basava was a
human being, whole and humane and comprising different character traits that
need not and should not be homogenized to facilitate institutionalization. While
bigoted fundamentalists would have a convenient sanitization of history, Shiv
fights for truth in all its heterogeneous components. Wading through the numerous
contradictory accounts of Basava’s life means parting several meeting rivers,
separating history and myth, pulling apart history and legend, deciding which
chunks of history will keep the myth earth-bound, which slivers of myth will cast
light and insight on dull, historical fragments

All forms of rituals and established beliefs in religion are challenged. A
satirically irreverent tone discusses deities, gods and goddesses. When posing for
the class photographs at PG School, Vasu Master doesn’t sport the caste mark and
those who have their caste marks flashing brilliantly on their foreheads look
clownish to Vasu Master. In Vasu Master’s view, the different gods are props that
man has created for his emotional support. He recollects his father’s quoting of
Shakespeare on gods: “They are all but stomachs, and we all but food: They eat us
hungrily, and when they are full, they belch us” (99) when he scoffs at his friend
Venkatesan’s habit of breaking a coconut at the Pillayar temple before increment
day. In In Times of Siege, the shop that sells crutches has the legend written
prominently on the walls “Corruption is a national menace. We must root out
corruption in all parameters of activity” (23). The narrator continues with an
observation that provides pungent irony thus: “And ironically and most tellingly,
every inch of wall space around is covered with luridly coloured gods and goddesses, as if, leaving out one god would result in losing His\Her favour” (23).

In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Devi’s questions elicit interesting answers from her grandmother. During Damayanti’s swayamvara, Damayanti distinguishes Nala from the other gods who have come to woo her. The gods’ feet don’t touch the ground, not because they are divine but because they don’t want their feet sullied by the dirt and grime of the earth. In *When Dreams Travel*, Satyasama often chooses a lush peepul tree to climb to the top and view the city that she loves. The narrator mentions that she didn’t know that many wise men had chosen the peepul as the perfect backdrop for meditation and enlightenment. The narrator adds, “Nor did she know that they usually chose to sit in the shade of the tree, eyes shut” (138). Here, there is a reference to the Buddha. At the same time there is a satirical attack on men who make use of religion and other institutions for their comfort, men, who take refuge in religion and other institutions, enjoying the shade it offered them, while remaining blind to the needs of less privileged ones, like women and lower castes for whom the tree seems to offer no shade.

In *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*, educational institutions which are the pillars of modern civilized society are pulled apart, rendered threadbare under Githa Hariharan’s censorious eyes. The schools today, aim at mass producing statues of certain desirable moulds. Mani, the special student that Vasu Master gets to meet just after his retirement from PG school wouldn’t fit into any of these moulds- the attempt has only served to harden him to the point to breaking. “He had
swallowed, chewed up, spat out, outgrown: his parents, four siblings, two younger 
sisters and two older brothers; eight doctors, the last with foreign degrees and 
equipment, four schools and innumerable principals, teachers, fellow pupils, 
canes, taunts and jeers” (11).

The remains of PG still fresh in Vasu master, Vasu master falls back on the 
usual props that had served him so well in all his years at PG. But the dog eared 
reader, the copy books and all the paraphernalia of a typical classroom do not 
elicit so much as a flicker on Mani’s face. Every single method, rule, strategy 
already practised and revered as flawless in PG is tried and found lacking in 
Mani’s case. He just smells the pencils and books that Vasu master holds out to 
him, even as a hounded animal, suspicious of its surroundings would examine 
everything around it. All his tactics to reach out to Mani, let alone start teaching 
anything to him prove futile. Vasu Master is virtually reduced to a grovelling pulp 
with all his sense of achievement or mastery in skills of his trade, reduced to zero, 
as he struggles unsuccessfully to communicate with the expressionless mask that 
stands for Mani’s face. It is in fact a whole new education for Vasu master in the 
process of education.

Months and several futile overtures later, Vasu Master recalls the words of 
his own father and realizes that, what Mani needs is not a mere teacher but a 
pragmatic healer, someone who would help him to take away, brick by brick, the 
walls that he had built round himself, someone who would show him how to live . In one of the numerous stories that make up the novel, the wise snake speaks thus
of the qualities of a teacher to the gentle mouse who aspires to be one—“You have to first become a judge, an ideologue, a priest and a doctor”. And then comes the difficult part. In addition to all this, a teacher “must grow a womb that would nurture and then deliver” (29-30).

It is equally an education for Mani as for his Master Vasu. When he embarks on his new, second career in teaching Vasu Master suddenly realizes that the boundaries that he had had or seen, boundaries beyond which he had never thought it was possible to explore, suddenly dwindle and fade away. All of a sudden, there are unlimited horizons before him, for him to reach out and explore. He reads about Procrustes, the mythical figure and his single uniform size beds for all the travellers who came his way.

Most classes in PG, particularly Veera Naidu’s Moral Science classes had been Procrustean beds, Vasu Master realizes with a new hindsight. Some of the more sensitive, intelligent students hate being made deficient creatures with bound arms and feet that would fit into the beds. Mani had been hypersensitive. He had smelt out and named the instruments that were being used to cut him down to size and his form of rebellion had been to shut himself behind walls.

It is Vasu master who indentifies the special person that Mani is. As beautifully put forth in the little symbolic episodes that the author uses to carry forward her story, he is like a bluebottle who prefers not to be part of a mindless crowd buzzing the same tune in unison. Instead of learning the survival leap that other flies would be interested in, the bluebottle that Mani is, wants to practise at
the somersaults, spectacular ones that the other flies cannot or would not think of. As Vasu Master puts, it “every child is a fresh possibility of advancement. Who are we to weep over the new spark of light, a smouldering prophet perhaps and decide that it is all hopeless?” (230).

Indeed, there is a rich world of imagination that the hurt, despairing, different Mani had locked behind thick grey walls. It is for Vasu Master to work at the walls, patiently feeling round his way, till he manages to establish one fine crack. And in one heaven sent moment, Mani makes bold and hands Vasu Master a bright landscape with a sun, vines, creeper and butterflies, that he has decided not to cover with the usual veil of thick black strokes.

Vasu Master sees the crack and the person behind it. He also suddenly realizes his secondary role – only Mani could break down, scale, vault over, that wall between him and the rest of his life. And to keep in touch with the emerging Mani, Vasu has to learn again and again, “how to go back, way, way back to a time before he began to teach- To the early days, the very beginning of learning and understanding” (232-33). And, when the novel ends, the reader sees the process continuing between Vasu Master and Mani, as it should with intriguing questions that go to prove that the teaching learning process is never a static one but one that has to open itself to ever changing possibilities that would keep going on and on.

Here, PG School as it stands with its three grades of punishment, the supreme belief in the efficacy of the cane, the rigid lessons and the copy books and
the hours of continuous lecturing, is a satirical symbol of all the inconsiderate routine and self-defeating, obsolete procedures that are the plague of the educational system in the major part of the country today. The utter failure of this kind of system in reaching out to young minds and making them realize each one’s individual potential while retaining the joy of learning, is emphasised in the novel.

Githa Hariharan, in her own voice rebels against the rigid institutionalization of education. With reference to the hell that the historian Shiv is put through in *In Times of Siege* by a group called the Ithihas Suraksha Manch for a lesson he has written on the reformer poet, Basava, she says in response to a question:

> The process of learning is supposed to break down walls and enlarge the student’s world, not shrink it by encouraging the irrational or reinforcing prejudice or inculcating hatred of anything or anyone that is different from self. Most of all it is supposed to encourage debate and disagreement. How do you learn to think for yourself if you swallow all the answers someone (and someone ill equipped) has cooked up for you? (“New Voices, New Challenges” 32)

Again and again, the author reiterates the idea that truth is not absolute and can never be so. An intelligent learner should be able to grasp at the shifting strands and arrive at the closest appropriation to it. Education that aims at
suppression of all offending facts and strives for a sickening homogeneity can never teach the necessary analytical skills to the students.

Cultures, the world over give a high place to mothers. The Vedas speak of "Matri Shakti" and the Manu Smriti says that a mother is worth ten fathers. The Catholic faith places the worship of Madonna, mother of Christ on par with the worship of Christ and there is the practice of addressing the nation as the motherland in almost all countries. Yet this exalted view of mothers does not extend to the conception of woman as a whole. Sadly a glaring dichotomy exists in the conception of woman in the patriarchal construct. The dichotomy is labelled as the "madonna/whore dichotomy" and is further elaborated thus: “the twin images of woman as on the one hand, the sexual property of and on the other, the chaste mothers of their children (are) the means whereby men ensure both the sanctity and interest of their families and their extra-familial pleasure” (Barrett 45).

Man was initially afraid of woman’s ability to create life. He started seeing woman as being closer to nature than Man. This was because a woman’s body space and life cycle are more taken up with the natural processes of reproduction than is man’s body which leaves him freer to use tools and symbols to hunt and make war. Woman’s identity with nature endowed woman in particular with contradictory meanings. When nature was taken to be that part of the world which human beings have understood, mastered and made their own, woman was seen as the repository of the natural law which renders nature, intelligible and benign. When it was taken as that which has not yet been penetrated or mastered and
employed for his own use, like the wilderness and deserts, “she was conceived as a creature of uncontrolled passion, which made her a dangerous source of disorder” (qtd. in Greene and Khan 10).

As man tamed nature to make it useful to him, he wanted woman to be tamed and remain useful to him. Hence, the denial of women’s sexuality which he saw as a source of possible disorder and the sanctifying of motherhood which ensured a steady line of sons to strengthen the agricultural setup in the early days and heirs to perpetuate the family later on.

Gayatri Spivak refers to the human society itself as a “uterine social organization” (152) in her essay, “French Feminism in an International Frame” because the justification for a woman’s existence seems to be in her capacity to become a mother. A corollary of this expectation of the male mind is the repression of the idea of sexuality in women. Spivak speaks of how clitoridectomy is practised in some savage societies and how civilised societies do precisely the same through less painful means by defining female sexuality in terms of reproduction (womb) thereby managing to excise female sexuality as a non-reproductive autonomous pleasure. Spivak states that this glorification of reproductive function and repression of female sexuality “operates the specific oppression of women” (153).

Another glaring contradiction in the concept of motherhood is the fact that though motherhood is given an elevated status in society, the monthly physical rituals associated with it are considered unclean. While many cultures including
the Hindu culture prohibit women from participating in several social and religious activities, during the menstrual period, Ruthven records that even the matrilineal Crowe society had some taboos on the menstruating woman. Such women were not allowed to ride the superior horses. Only the inferior horses were supplied to them.

Hence it is only natural that when feminism slowly took root in modern society, motherhood status with the almost saintly halo ascribed to it and the false sense of power and the exploitation, it served to hide came under the close scrutiny of the wakened women. Simone de Beauvoir insists in *The Second Sex*, that there is no such thing as a maternal instinct in the human species. In her words “maternity is usually a strange mixture of narcissism, altruism, idle day-dreaming, sincerity, bad faith, devotion and cynicism” (528).

Ruthven while talking about motherhood describes it as another myth which deflects attention from what Francois Bach calls the calvary of pregnancy by making it out that giving birth to a child is always a supremely fulfilling and ennobling experience. Here Ruthven quotes Queen Victoria’s observation on her experience of motherhood. She confesses to have felt like “a cow or a dog at such moments” (79). As the patriarchal setup needs sons to keep the order of things going, motherhood has been made into the ultimate destiny of essential womanhood. It thus joins those other repressive mythologies which collaborate in the subordination by domestication of women and which Charlotte Perkins Gilman labelled “the Kaiser’s four Ks-Kuchen (cooking), Kinder (children), Kirche
church), Kleider (clothes)” (qtd. in Ruthven 79).

In the light of these pronouncements which have sought to redefine views of motherhood, when the reader takes a look into the novels taken for study, it is found that Githa Hariharan refuses to present motherhood as something glorious and wonderful, with all the sweetness and light, that patriarchal concerns have invested it with.

In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, the protagonist Devi’s grandmother dispels the halo around the romanticized version of motherhood and introduces Devi even when young, to different versions of mothers. She tells Devi, the story of King Shantanu’s wife Ganga who dropped seven of their new born sons soon after each one was born, into the water and drowned them. Mayamma points out to Devi, the mother fish that eats its own guppies and swims around supremely indifferent.

Devi herself is not very enthusiastic towards the prospect of motherhood. She speaks dispassionately of possible motherhood. “Mahesh has found a doctor. I will leave the clinic with my parts glued together, whole, mended, an efficient receptacle for motherhood” (89). The oppressiveness of societal pressure and Devi’s own disbelief in motherhood as something glorious and romantic that needs to be grasped at all costs is evident in Devi’s description of the waiting room in a maternity clinic: “pregnant women of all shapes and sizes leaning back on their chairs, staring vacantly, waiting. The burka-clad woman, the slim one in jeans with plucked eyebrows—all had something in common, the bond of their gently
sitting stomachs” (90).

Devi portrays the unreasonable guilt that fills a woman’s mind, when she is not able to bear a child and carry out her socially ascribed role to perfection: “I saw a woman across the room, pale, drawn, her hands nervously idle on her lap. Her stomach was flat, she would not meet anyone's eye. She could have been me” (90). From the male point of view however, a woman's femininity itself becomes suspect when she does not or cannot become a mother. Mahesh tells Devi, “You look so fragile, so feminine. It is hard to believe that you don't want a child” (93).

Sudhir Kakar’s observation becomes relevant here. He points out that, “…motherhood confers upon her (the Indian woman) a purpose and an identity that nothing else in her culture can. Each infant borne and nurtured by her safely into childhood, especially if the child is a son is both a certification and a redemption” (qtd. in Rao 167).

Mayamma, a major character in the novel powerfully portraying the state of woman in the financially deprived sections of society, knows and believes herself that the justification for her life in her husband's household would lie in her becoming a mother. Mayamma’s experience of motherhood is however an extremely painful one. Mayamma's lucky horoscope promises ten sons to her. Her mother-in-law had approved her after examining her jewellery and her horoscope. With a crooked husband to whom the marriage vows are meaningless and Mayamma, no more than a piece of furniture, Mayamma nevertheless takes up penance to realise her destiny as woman. When her mother-in-law tells her, “no,
no, Maya, no rice for you today, it’s Friday, no vegetables tomorrow, no tamarind” and yells at her to stop thinking of food and to think of motherhood instead, Mayamma accepts it as her just lot. After ten long years of penance when she wakes up at four, dips in the pure coldness of the pond, starves every other day, gives up salt and tamarind, feeds rice and curds to snakes, bathes the lingam with umpteen different things, at last her son is born on the day of Diwali.

Diwali in Hindu mythology marks the death of a daemon. In Mayamma's life, it marks the birth of a daemon. At fourteen, he threatens to beat his mother and sells her last pair of gold bangles. He grows up to be the wastrel son who drains Mayamma of all motherly tenderness. When she refuses to give him, her diamond ear rings, which she is saving for her daughter-in-law, he beats her with an iron frying pan and snatches them from her ears. Her journey as a mother comes to an end, when her son succumbs to an uncontrollable fever, in spite of being nursed by her own hands for about two months. The day he dies, Mayamma cries as she had never done before and soon after, burns her lucky horoscope that had promised her ten sons and her tears along with her son's body.

In spite of the physical and mental exertion associated with motherhood, it is ironical that right of possession or authority over the child is not guaranteed to the mother, especially in the lives of women of the lower economic strata. The incident that appears as “Prelude” to The Thousand Faces of Night provides chilling confirmation of the fact: Mayamma cries out why? to the shifty eyed doctor when she loses her first child in childbirth. She gets blamed by the doctor
and beaten up by her mother-in-law: “Do you need any more proof that this is not a woman? The barren witch has killed my grandson, and she lies there asking us, why?” The dead child is considered to be not Mayamma’s child, but her mother-in-law’s grandson.

To Devi’s mother, Sita, motherhood is a source of false power. When Sita’s passion for music is refused an outlet, when the prescribed role of wife and daughter-in-law stifle her movement as an individual, Sita relinquishes her ties with her veena in an emphatic tearing of the strings. But in their place she takes up invisible strings at the ends of which are tied her husband's and daughter's lives. Devi is Sita's new veena. She skillfully directs Devi's life along the paths she has charted out for her, exactly as she guides the jasmine climber to grow along the horizontal props she has put up in her methodically planned garden. She thinks with satisfaction of her success in moulding Devi's life according to her wishes. The author remarks: “The tender, clinging young creeper, so eager to be led in the right direction, so rewarding for a trainer reminded Sita of Devi” (99). Sita's version of motherhood reminds one of Beauvoir's analysis of motherhood: “the mother finds in her infant as does the lover in his beloved, a carnal plenitude and this not in surrender, but in domination; she obtains in her child what man seeks in woman; an other combining nature and mind, who is to be both prey and double” (527).

This indeed shatters any remaining illusions about the halo that patriarchy has attached to the image of mother and which society has grown so used to
seeing and taking for granted that the movies and fiction are full of it and no one cares to see the frayed edges of the halo along with the reasons and the implications. It is not realised that motherhood is a serious commitment and an obligation. As Beauvoir emphatically asserts, there is nothing natural about such an obligation. She cautions, “there is no such thing as an unnatural mother, to be sure since there is nothing natural about human love, but precisely for that reason, there are bad mothers” (538). She says that motherhood is an engagement, a promise to be carried out. Githa Hariharan's words conceived by Devi as she attempts to fill in the gaps in her grandmother's story of Ganga, are more to the point: “To be a good mother, to be a mother at all, you have to earn the title, just as you have to renew your wifely vows everyday” (TFN 89).

In The Ghosts of Vasu Master, Vishnu and Venu are Vasu Master’s biological sons. Much as he loves his sons, he refuses to take the easy, accepted version of retired life that his sons hold out to him: being close to them, but with nothing else to do, other than wait for the end. Vasu Master rejects the sentimental associations attributed to biological parenthood, in order to learn to be more than a biological mother to the poor, love-deprived Mani.

In the novel, the author states that “a true teacher is responsible for the second birth of a child” (198). Ancient custom of the ‘gurukula’ system of teaching- learning necessitates the pressing of the child to the teacher’s belly, on the first day of introduction to the ‘gurukula’. The close bodily contact is supposed to continue for three days, after which the disciple becomes a part of the teacher’s
household. Vasu Master however continues with the close association through more days than three. Mani becomes the purpose and intent of Vasu Master’s life, the meaning that at last effectively heals the metaphorical hole in Vasu Master’s stomach.

The mother usually effects a child’s first introduction to the world. Vasu Master does it for Mani. His patience and love penetrate the thick barriers of defence that the scared mind of Mani had covered itself with. The moment, Mani’s self emerges hesitantly out of its shell and he says “Mani” for the first time in a whispered voice, Vasu Master’s joy is overwhelming. It is indeed a rebirth for Mani, through Vasu Master. Vasu Master had held Mani, safe, secure, cared for in a metaphorical womb for months together to enable Mani to get the strength and energy to emerge out of himself.

Vishnu and Venu are Vasu Master’s biological sons. But he has never been mother and father and every other loving influence, source of care and understanding to them in the same scale as he is to Mani, because motherhood as a skill and necessary attribute of a teacher has been brought home to him only in his second stint at teaching. He has evolved into a better teacher and in responding to the special needs of Mani, has in the process, grown to be a mother too. Indeed, compared to the touching delineation of the bond between Vasu Master and Mani, the other biological bonds between Mangala and her sons or between Vasu Master and his mother, come through with less significance in the novel. Vasu Master says that his memory of his mother is as pale and insubstantial as his memory of
Mangala. Vasu Master’s mother had not had the courage to come out of the shadows of her tyrannical husband and Vasu Master himself had not tried to understand his wife, Mangala. That Mani is now the object of Vasu Master’s deep love is understood in the way, the latter sees his father’s face and Mangala’s mingling in Mani’s face.

In *When Dreams Travel*, Shahrzad’s choice of priorities and her conscious vision of her place in the country’s history is made clear, quite early:

To go to the wazir’s room, where books, plans, men and their seductive powers awaited her, she had to cross the invisible line that edged her mother’s wing. Behind this shoreline lay a sea of predictable movement, bodies swelling and going flaccid, bodies dripping blood or milk, bodies coming together in sticky embrace, bodies heaving and pushing to come apart. Shahrzad had to leave behind this monotonous, womanish sea, this watery womb and put her foot on land. (68)

The restricted world that is set aside for women of her time and place with the limited meanings of marriage and motherhood, blown out of proportion and attached to their lives as the only necessary meanings does not satisfy Shahrzad. She has a loftier mission to accomplish. Indeed, for both Shahrzad and Dunyazad, motherhood is almost just another event in their tumultuous lives. They do not attach any emotional or romantic significance to it. Shahrzad thinks dispassionately of her pregnancy thus: “Now, her stomach has taken in some
homeless soul, pickled it in her own portable, living ocean” (122). She thinks that pregnancy and associated confinement have a crippling effect on her plans for herself and her city. When being a saviour is at any time a tough and lonely job, “to be a saviour, rooted to earth by so much solid flesh, slowed down by prosaic pregnancy” is very tough (123). She is conscious of her larger responsibilities even on the point of delivery of her first child. “She calls out in panic, but to her surprise, her voice sounds normal and controlled. This is encouraging; her voice, which she hopes will save on a larger scale, is practicing charity at home” (124).

The courage and firm will, coupled with the sheer endurance, worthy of the saviour she is, eggs Shahrzad on even while undergoing an experience that is taking her perilously close to afterlife. She tells her sister, that she would tell the story of Bulukiya, that night. The blood leaking from her worries her “as much as the horrible constricting pain that makes her want to push and push, expel the ruthless parasite devouring everything inside her” (127). She perseveres and once her burden is released, is quick to deposit the future ruler of Shahbad in the nursemaid, Sabiha’s keeping, so that she and her sister might dare the hanging sword in its face and blunt it a little with their brains.

The enormity of Shahrzad’s achievement comes through in the final chapter of the novel, when the words she wishes to speak to the slave girls ring in her mind: “I, Shahrzad, saved your grandmothers from being beheaded. I saved them and so your mothers and you. You would not be here if I had not done it” (275). Here it is clearly seen that Shahrzad has transcended the role of biological mother
to her three children and has become the mother-figure for the whole kingdom, through her intelligence and courage

Dunyazad also rises above the role of biological mother to her imbecile son to become the saviour-mother of Samarkhand. She watches and waits, as the reign of terror envelops Samarkhand under Shahzaman. When her efforts to contain the damage being caused by the sickness and suspicion perpetrated by Shahzaman’s rule prove fruitless and insufficient, considering the enormity of it all, she, who had been ready to use her dagger against Shahryar himself, has a hand to play in the disposal of Shahzaman. After Shahzaman’s unexplained disappearance, the city heals under the calm guidance of Dunyazad. Though she is responsible for the restoration of sanity in Samarkhand, she is not greedy for power for herself or for her son. She recognizes the unsuitability of her son to be the ruler of the country and makes her stepson assume power. She thus becomes the mother-figure for her city in putting the welfare of its people above the vesting of power onto her son.

The disenchantment with various institutions, ranging from marriage and motherhood to political institutions like monarchy, religion and Western educational methods is thus put across powerfully in the four novels discussed. A discussion of the women in Githa Hariharan’s novels and the nature of the worlds they inhabit, the circumscription or the emancipation that is a part of their lives becomes necessary now.

Chapter – III