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The Progress of Indian Women from 1900s to Present

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The Progress of Indian Women from 1900s to Present

Has the status of women in India risen in the
21st century?

Nidhi Shrivastava
(April 16, 2009)

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Introduction

Indira Gandhi, the “Margaret Thatcher” of India, is one of the most powerful Indian women in the country’s history. There is a list of powerful and emancipated Indian women, like Indira Gandhi, such as Sarojni Naidu¹, a devoted participant of India’s freedom struggle alongside Mahatma Gandhi; Kiran Bedi, India’s first women who joined Indian Police Service in 1972 as a highest ranking officer and is famous for her tough and innovative police strategies; Indira Nooyi, chairwoman and CEO of PepsiCo is Indian-born leading business women in corporate America; internationally acclaimed actress and former Miss World Aishwarya Rai Bachchan; and many more. Although there are a number of powerful women in India, who are able to exercise their agency in India and abroad, there are also the common women. For the common woman in India, generally the society places her in an endless cycle of duties as a mother, wife, and daughter, which obliterates her identity as well as restrains her agency within the society. Because India is diverse and vast, women’s status depends on their position within the stratified society. For example, the status of an upper middle class woman in the metropolitan cities is far better than the women in the remote towns and cities, who are still following the traditional lifestyle of the 18th century. Though not discussed in the paper, caste is another method of classification in the Indian society. Over the course of the twentieth century, there

have been many reform movements to transform the subjugated role of women in the Indian society.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the evolution of a common Indian woman's status through literature from 1900s to present. Literature acts as a lens into a culture and novels intensify and exemplify the numerous issues, which Indian women have faced. The novels I will study are Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and The World* (1915), Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998), and Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* (2001). In these novels, the three female protagonists, Bimala, Virmati, and Akhila try to overcome their traditional roles and impose their identity in their respective society. Although there are exceptional cases, it is education, which allows distinction between a progressive woman and a woman confined in her traditional role. The more learned a woman is, the more she is able to exercise her agency.

However, before delving into the novels, it is vital to place them within the historical as well as sociological context. In order to do so, the knowledge of the status of women pre-1900s is essential. Hence, I will mention a brief summary, which discusses the status of women during the Indus civilization, Aryan, and Mogul times. In addition, my focus will be on the three reform movements, which took place after the 1900s, which have taken place to promote the agency of women in the Indian society. I will compare the characters of the novels such as Bimala, Virmati, Akhila, and Janaki with either real women, such as Sarla Devi, Rabindranath Tagore's famous niece, who were in similar situations as they were or will compare them to mythological Goddesses such as Sita from India's famous epic, *The Ramayana*. I have also examined the sociological books such as Elizabeth Bumiller's *May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons* and Bharati Ray's *Early Feminists of Colonial India*. In addition, I have also

mentioned Hannah Fane's "Female Element in Indian Culture" and Sophie and Michael Tharakan's "Status of Women in India: A Historical Perspective." I will also examine a quote in *Manusmriti* and how this saying has codified in the Indian culture.

Tagore's *The Home and The World* is set during the Swadeshi movement. The Swadeshi movement developed from the Partition of Bengal, which took place in 1905 and 1908. Initially, the Partition plan was opposed in 1905 Calcutta Town Hall meetings, through the conventional methods of opposition such as press campaigns, meetings, petitions, as well as, conferences were held. Because these methods failed to make a difference, new methods were introduced such as the boycott of British goods "with the aim of encouraging indigenous industry and cottage crafts." ² At this time, the women's emancipation movements were gaining momentum. One of the most influential organizations was All India Women's Conference, it was established in 1927 as a forum, which not only began a forum to discuss women's issues, but grew to become an organization, which targeted issues such as purdah, child marriage, and other issues women faced in the 19th century India (Bumiller 19). The nationalist movement was causing fervor and changing the gender dynamics of Bengal at this time. The concept of motherland was becoming popular at this time as notions such as the Mother Goddess. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee had penned the National Song of India, *Bande Mataram* (Hail Motherland) in 1876. ³Rabindranath Tagore was among those involved in the *Swadeshi* movement. He wrote a song portraying Bengal as Goddess Durga. In addition, he composed *Gaire Baire*, or *the Home and The World*, which I will further study. While the novel has themes of Indian nationalism and terrorism, it also deals with emancipation of women. Bimala, the female protagonist, is caught in the love triangle, between two men. Nikhil, her husband, embraces the western ideologies and his rival and friend, Sandeep represents values, which Nikhil disagrees with, especially Sandeep's

involvement in the Swadeshi movement. Nikhil encourages Bimala to become an educated woman. He hires a Miss Gilby to teach her. (Tagore 19) The confusion she faces is symbolic of the inner conflict a middle-class woman faced at this time period, which was whether to become independent or to remain confined the walls of her threshold.

The next novel is *Difficult Daughters*, written by Manju Kapur. Although it is written in 1998, the novel is set on the time period during the last years, which were leading to the socio-political catastrophe, the Partition of 1947. During this time period, women were involved in Gandhi's Satyagraha movement. The *Satyagraha* movement was essentially Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent civil disobedience campaign. While women were gradually becoming active during the Swadeshi movement a decade earlier. It was during this movement, when they were highly involved in the fight for their independent nation. According to Jawaharlal Nehru's *The Discovery of India*, mentioned in Bumiller's book, he recounts that "our women came to the front and took charge of the struggle. Women had always been there, of course, but now there was an avalanche of them, which took not only the British government but their own men folk by surprise. Here were these women, women of the upper or middle classes, leading sheltered lives in their own homes-peasant women, working -class women, rich women-pouring out in their tens of thousands in defiance of government order...it was not only that display of courage and daring, but what was even more surprising was the organizational power they showed (Bumiller 19)." While there are female characters in the novel like Swarnalata participating in the movement, the novel is centered on Virmati. Harish falls for her because she is an educated woman, unlike his wife, Ganga, whom he has to marry according to the tradition of arranged childhood marriage. Virmati struggles to create an identity for herself and is like, Bimala, in many ways because she is unable to make a mark of herself within her society. Her desire and

passion towards Harish impedes her intellectual goals. The goals, which could have led her to emancipation like the women, she idolized.

While these two novels are set within the historical context exemplifying the struggles women faced during in the early 20th century. However, the final and last novel, which I will analyze, will focus on the contemporary issues women face. The last novel is Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*. In the *Ladies Coupé*, Nair questions a taboo, which continues to affect many women in India to this day. Akilandeshwari or Akhila is a forty-five year old spinster, who was unable to marry due to the hardships and circumstances, which her family faced after her father's death. She was immediately considered the "man" of the family because she is the eldest daughter. She has to take responsibility for her siblings and mother, and therefore, no one imposes marriage upon her and assumes she is happy with her situation. In the novel, she is seated in a ladies cabin in a train from Bangalore to Kanyakumari. I will examine her and a fellow passenger, Janaki. Nair alludes to Sita, Rama's consort in the *Ramayana*. However, Janaki is not like Sita and dominates her husband.

In order to place the novels in the India's socio-historical context, it is important to briefly discuss the turning points of the status of women in the Indian history.

The Status of Indian Women Pre-1900s: The Discussion of *Manusmriti* and *Ramayana*

While it is difficult to compress the thousands of years of Indian history in a couple paragraphs, I will discuss the important moments in a historical timeline, which defined the status of women before the 1930s. The "golden period" of a woman's status was during the Indus civilization. The matriarchal society transformed into a male-dominated system after the

Aryans came to India. The third and final declination happened during the Mogul times. It was not until the 19th century when reforms began to take place opposing the practice of sati, purdah, and child marriage. There were three major reform movements, which elevated and involved women: The Swadeshi Movement, The Satyagraha movement, and another movement, which began in the 1970s ignited by the report “Towards Equality,” written by Vina Mazumdar.

India’s civilization began in the Indus Valley 4,500 to 5000 years ago. Mother Goddess was one of the major Gods the Dravidians*, the inhabitants of the Indus Valley worshipped. In Hannah Fane’s “The Female Element in Indian Culture,” Fane notes that in the pre-Aryan society, archaeologists have unearthed figurines in Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. The figurines were adorned with necklaces and wore a headdress. In addition, archaeologists also found “seals and sealings, approximately one-inch square; many of these portray the Goddess. One depicts a nude female, her legs apart and a plant issuing from her womb.”⁴ Animals, such as tigers, doves, and bulls, were also illustrated in the seals. There is a seal, which shows a nude woman with a body of tiger and horns of a goat. The tiger is still considered the vehicle of Goddess Lakshmi even in contemporary India. There are more depictions of bulls rather than doves in the society. The bulls are also a symbol of fertility painted beside a dancing woman. It is also always found beside the Shiva-lingam in the present India (Fane 55). These depictions indicate that there was female pre-dominance in the Indus civilization. Sir John Marshall*, the man who discovered the Indus civilization, agrees that the women’s maternal attribute was venerated:

In no country in the world has the worship of the Divine Mother been so deep rooted and ubiquitous as India. Her shrines are found in every town and hamlet throughout. She is the...prototype of power...which developed into that of Sakti.

Her representative are the...village goddesses...who one and all are personifications of the same power...That like the Mother Goddesses of Western Asia they originated in a matriarchal state of society is a highly reasonable supposition (Fane 56)

John Marshall's theory that the Indus civilization was matriarchal is evidence that the women's status could have been better than after the Aryans arrived in India. The premise of Hannah Fane's article is that the invasions of Aryans, Synthians, and Muslims gradually denigrated the status of women in India, who were revered and worshipped during the Indus civilizations.

According to Sophie M. Tharakan and Michael Tharakan's article "Status of Women in India: A Historical Perspective," Tharakans explore the role of a woman during the Aryan period of Indian history. Tharakan and Fane describe the Aryans in a conflicting manner. While Tharakan describes the Aryans as a "nomadic tribe with exceptional mobility given by the horse and chariot,"⁵ Fane quotes W.T. Elmore who writes that the Aryans were "relatively barbaric invaders, provided by their horses with an immense (military) advantage who conquered the Indus civilization."⁶ Whether the Aryans was a nomadic tribe who had assimilated with the Dravidians or conquerors of the Indus civilization, their presence transformed the agency of women in India. Between 2000 BC and 7000 BC, the Aryans had developed a patriarchal system overpowering the matriarchal system of the Dravidians. Although during the Vedic age, a woman's status was reasonable, women were able to perform rituals independently and both boys and girls received education (*Upanayana* and *Bramacharya*). Due to their education, their marriage age would have been sixteen or seventeen. Until 500 BC, women were even allowed

the privilege of “Gandharva Vivah.” This marriage allowed both sexes to choose their own life partners. It was not until 1000 B.C. when the status of Indian women began to decline:

The great decline in the status of women, corresponding to the consolidation of private property and commodity production, seems to have occurred round about 1000 B.C. Copper had been found and from then on till the rise of Magadha stretched the period of the epics, *Mahabharata*, and *Ramayana*, when Aryan expansion took place east and south of the Indo-Gangetic plain... The consequences of these developments were far-reaching for women. The shift from the hoe to the plough eliminated their significance as the productive participants in the economic activity. The natural division of labor between man and woman became advantageous for the male as it was in his sphere that significant developments took place: he became the owner not only of the plough, but of the field...and the surplus of the wealth produced. Women could, from now onwards, only share the wealth with the man without really having any control over it. In addition, the polygamic tendencies of the Aryan male who started bringing into the household dasyu women as female slaves or sometimes even as wives caused further decline in the status of the Aryan women even in the household where she once reigned supreme (Tharakan 118-19).

Therefore, the declination of the women’s agency within the Indian society had begun due to the socio-economic changes, which took place. Because *Ramayana’s* Sita is essential in the thesis, it is vital to know the background of the epic. It is one of India’s famous epics written between 400 BC and 200 A.D⁷. The plot of the epic is centered on Rama, Lord Vishnu’s seventh

avatar, who represents the ideal son, brother, husband, and king. His consort and wife, Sita, and his brother, Lakshmana, accompany him to the forest, when he is exiled for fourteen years. They face numerous obstacles throughout the epic. Because Rama is an ideal king, his looks attract the demoness, Surpanaka, who is Ravana's sister. In anger and frustration from her constant pursuit, Rama cuts off her eyes and nose. Ravana is horrified by Rama's mistreatment of his sister and vows revenge. In the guise of an aesthetic, he abducts Sita. This abduction leads to the epic battle fought between Rama, the good and Ravana, the evil demon. Eventually, Rama is able to rescue Sita. Ironically, he abandons Sita when the people of Ayodhya begin to condemn her for living with her. My focus will be on the character of Sita because she is an obedient, dutiful, and ideal wife. She is viewed as the model of an ideal wife. I will further discuss her in the thesis later.

Recalling the socio-historical context, women were also no longer able to receive education by 300 B.C. *Dharmasutras* were also written in between 400 BC and 100 A.D. and publicized an early child marriage. It was during this time in 200 A.D., when the *Manusmriti* came into being. The *Manusmriti* is one of the eighteen smritis of the *Dharma Shastras*.⁸ The most famous law of Manu will be further discussed in the essay. Many of the "laws" in the smriti will be further in the essay. According to Tharakan, it was during this time period when the "concepts of female chastity and strict monogamous marriage took deep roots in the Hindu mind."⁹ However, Elizabeth Bumiller, in her sociological study of the women in India, also mentions that

Manu may well have been a misogynist, but the society in general was motivated by other stresses. As the Aryans spread geographically, they came into contacts with other cultures, particularly the darker-skinned Dravidian tribes of the South.

In the opinion of Romila Thapar, a highly respected historian and a supporter of woman's causes in India, the oppression of women developed hand in hand with the idea of preserving caste. Manu's code of law, which first set down the rules of caste in India, is in her a view an illustration "of the need to rigidly define caste society," to create rules that keep the outsiders, the people viewed as "pollutants," in their place (Bumiller 17).

Although *Manusmriti* was an important element, who set codes for men and women in the society, he was not as influential as many feminists have believed.

The third and final decline took place during the Mogul times. Both Tharakan and Bumiller emphasize this period because it was during this time when the concept of purdah was emphasized:

The Muslim invasions from the eleventh century AD onwards did not help in the alleviation of woman's condition. The various interpretations of the Koranic instructions corresponded to the prevailing norm of the woman's role in the society to which Muslims came. Women were denied any place in religious organizations and legal affairs. Neither did they enjoy effective property inheritance rights. The Muslim period saw the popularization of the *durka* (purdah), polygamy, and unilateral right of divorce for men (Tharakan 120)

Bumiller mentions that the Muslim invasion is a possible cause for the denigration of the women's status. She states that "Moguls brought Islam to India on a large scale, and with it, at

least in the view of many Hindus, the regressive attitudes toward women that spread the practice of purdah and sati.”¹⁰

The first reform movement of the status of Indian women took place during the nineteenth century among the middle class in Calcutta, during the time period of British Raj. The *Home and the World* is emblematic of the struggle, which was taking place within the middle class households. These reformers challenged the practices of sati, purdah*, and child marriage. During this era, Raja Rammohan Roy* and Mahadev Govind Ranade* are few renowned names, who were an important part of this reform. In 1856, the widow remarriage was allowed while sati was banned in 1859.¹¹ During the 1930s, a significant progress was made of the status. It was in 1937, when the Hindu Woman’s Right to Property Act was passed for the widows. Tagore’s *Home and The World* was first published in 1915. Its contents magnify on a single woman, Bimala, who seeks to become independent, after being educated on her husband, Nikhil’s insistence, and steps out of the domestic sphere. The moment she steps out of the traditional boundaries, she is drawn towards his friend, Sandeep who preaches the *Swadeshi* movement and even worships her comparing her to Goddess Durga. Because her husband is progressive, he does not impose any decision on her and lets her decide between him and his friend. However, this novel is more than just a romantic novel; it also represents Rabindranath Tagore’s inner struggle. His disdain of the nationalistic movement occurs because he feels sympathetic towards those who are alienated from participating in the movement. As mentioned before in the introduction, the *Satyagraha* movement involved the participation of women in large numbers from all walks of life. After these movements, the latest movement began in the 1970s. According to Bumiller, mid-1970s also saw a major development of the status of Indian women when the government had released the contentious report on the status of Indian Women. It was

written by Vina Mazumdar*, entitled “Towards Equality”, which studied the status of women since independence. This report serves as the basis “for the current status of current women’s status in India.”¹²

Now that the historical and social context has been set, I will begin with the deeper analysis of Rabindranath Tagore’s masterpiece and study Bimala’s agency within the historical context.

1900-1930s: Bimala’s Dilemma in *The Home and the World* & The Swadeshi Movement

Women’s involvement and participation with Mahatma Gandhi in the anti-colonialism movement originates in the *Swadeshi* movement when middle class women began to participate. The Swadeshi movement was the “policy of boycotting British goods with the aim of encouraging indigenous industry and cotton crafts.”¹³ According to the introduction by Anita Desai, Tagore had initially been an active participant opposing Lord Curzon’s decision to partition Bengal in 1905. He later realized that this movement was “harming the poor, to whom Swadeshi was an abstract, distant, and meaningless term.”¹⁴ After the communal riots, which took place in response to the Swadeshi movement by Muslim peasants and traders, Tagore withdrew from the movement.

The Home and the World is the novel, which depicts Tagore’s inner struggle in lieu of the *Swadeshi* movement and its influence in further dividing the gap between the Hindus and Muslims.¹⁵ The plot of the Tagore’s novel revolves around three main characters - Bimala, the wife of progressive, ideal, and “westernized” Nikhil and his friend, Sandeep, who is a passionate revolutionary and active participant of the Swadeshi movement. Bimala represents Bengal, who

is torn between Nikhil and Sandeep's ideologies. While the former is emblematic of western values, while the latter is symbolic of his passion and dedicated towards the Swadeshi movement. Although this novel has political implications, my focus will be on Bimala's agency throughout the novel. Therefore, I will examine the novel to show the shifting role of the women during this time period:

The new woman was to be an educated and brave wife as an appropriate partner of an English-educated nationalist man, able to run an 'efficient' and 'orderly home' like her Western counterpart, be high-minded and spiritual like the women of the 'golden' age, become 'grihhalakshmis' ¹⁶like the Divine Lakshmi and fulfill her primary role as a courageous mother producing heroic children for the service of the nation. If the model was absurd, and inimitable, and indeed full of contradictions, no one was bothered. That was the new woman the nation needed, and it was women's duty to live up to it (Ray 41)

Although the women's duty as a householder and wife was necessary, the Bengali middle class was becoming strongly influenced by the Victorian England which allowed the "re-ordering of women into new models."¹⁷

Nikhil is an idealist man. He is also a progressive husband. However, the study of *Home and the World* is important, not only because it is a Tagore classic, but also because the female protagonist is encouraged by her husband to become her own individual. Not encouraged to follow the ever-popular Sita model as the obedient and traditional wife, Bimala is compared to Goddess Durga. In order to understand her struggle to acquire agency, I will compare her with Sarla Devi, who was an avid participant of the *Swadeshi* movement. According to Bharati Ray's

Early Feminists of Colonial India, Sarala Devi's mother, Swarnakumari Devi was the daughter of Maharshi Debendranath Tagore and the elder sister of Rabindranath Tagore (3). Sarala Devi embodies the new woman, which Rabindranath Tagore attempts to develop in Bimala.

According to Ray, the women in the Tagore family were enterprising and defied cultural norms in order to mark their identity¹⁸ Swarnakumari Devi was educated at the time of her marriage and was one of Bengal's earliest successful writers. She found the first women's organization in 1886 and devoted herself to nationalism with her husband. Sarala's father, Janakinath Ghosal was the nationalist leader of the Indian National Congress. He defied the rules of the Tagore household, where the "son-in-laws had had to become ghar-jamai or sons-in-laws living in the house at the father-in-law's house¹⁹." Nath left for England leaving his wife with her family where she grew up. Sarala Devi grew up in a unique household, which was not shrouded with the conformity to the traditional rules of their society. For example, Gyanadanandini Devi, the wife of Satyendranath Tagore, lived with her husband's family and defied the family custom when she publicly alighted from the carriage in 1866.²⁰ Sarala Devi was also Rabindranath Tagore's niece.

Tagore uses Nikhil to show the progressive reformation, which was taking place during his time. In the beginning of the novel, Nikhil encourages Bimla to step out of her cultural boundaries as a wife and become educated:

I would have you come into the heart of the outer world and meet reality. Merely going on with your household duties, living your life in the world of household conventions and the drudgery of household tasks- you were not made for that! If

we meet, and recognize each other, in the real world, then only will our love be true (Tagore 23).

Nikhil is conveying his desire to give Bimala a new perspective in her life as well as bring her out of the vicinity of her home. His confidence to “enhance” his wife’s nature shows the progressive shift that was taking place during Tagore’s time when women were no longer just expected to become housewives, but become a part of the nationalist movement. After 1905, when “the men folk wanted women to participate in the struggle,” the role of the women changed substantially. The nationalist leaders began to view their motherland as the Mother Goddess²¹, a concept that Tagore institutes in the novel, when Sandeep calls Bimala as the Goddess:

Since the goddess has vouchsafed your presence to her votary in such wonderful guise, it is for me to proclaim her worship throughout our land, and then shall the country gain new life. Your image make we in temple after temple (Tagore 124).

The nationalist leaders and participants of the *Swadeshi* movement began to exalt a woman’s status as the Goddesses and “the intellectuals helped the politicians to achieve this transformation in the domain of the culture [...] As the distaff side had been traditionally responsible for maintaining religious faith and rituals, the conversion of politics into religion created a political space for them [women], and made their participation easy and natural. A small number of women took part in the *Swadeshi* movement, but participated in larger numbers in the latter-day Gandhian movement. (Ray 38).” Therefore, when Tagore was composing *The Home and the World*, the status of women was shifting and the dilemma, which resulted from this transition, was reflected in Bimala.

Bimala's ideals are anchored on traditions, although she is easily influenced by both her husband and Sandeep. The entire novel is the ongoing dispute between Nikhil and Sandeep who vie for her love, attention, as well as her support for their beliefs. When Nikhil encourages her to step out of the purdah, she dismisses his wishes and says, "If the outside world has got on so long without me, it may go on for some time longer. It need not pine to death for the want of me (Tagore 23)." As a traditional wife, Bimala's life is inside the purdah. It would be sacrilegious for her status as his wife and his family's daughter-in-law to defy the traditions. She acknowledges that if she steps out of the conventional boundaries, it would cause grief to his grandmother. She is content with her seclusion and defies her husband's wishes for the societal expectations. She says that "I have read in books that we are called 'caged birds'. I cannot speak for others but I had so much in this cage of mine that there was not room for it in the universe... (Tagore 24)." In other words, Bimala is content with the agency she has, until Nikhil frees her from the luxurious "cage".

Bimala is a traditional wife and she is not aware of the storm, which is going to envelop her in the form of the *Swadeshi* movement. Nikhil also encourages her to become her own identity and provokes her to mold her own thoughts and make her own decisions. He also believes in women's education and was insistent for his wife to gain education. Indrani Mitra's "I Will Make Bimala One With My Country: Gender and Nationalism in Tagore's *The Home and the World*" argues that "Bimala of Nikhil's construction should enter the public sphere without jeopardizing the intrinsic values of the private." However, it does not happen that way, Bimala develops intense attraction to Sandeep and eventually is caught in the middle of the two men.

Although there is progress taking place during this time, Bimala's attraction to Sandeep shows a woman's vulnerability to sexuality and attraction upon the removal of the Purdah. Sandeep's presence in Bimala's life ignites the passion in her, which Nikhil lacks. Bimala's desire to participate in the Swadeshi movement is not received well by Nikhil. He says, "Why burn them [the western clothes]? [...] You need not wear them as long as you please? (Tagore 27)" Although Nikhil tries to instill modern and westernized ideal into Bimala, he does not wish to glorify and revere his own country and disapproves the *Swadeshi* movement. Like Tagore, he does not support the movement and believes that it is harming the market rather than supporting it. He exclaims, "To tyrannize for the country is to tyrannize over the country."²² His words emphasize his contempt of the movement.

Dismayed by Nikhil's disapproval for the political movement, Bimala turns to Sandeep, who represents freedom and passion to her. She swoons, "I was utterly unconscious of myself. I was no longer the lady of the Rajah's house, but the sole representative of Bengal's womanhood. And he [Sandeep] was the champion of Bengal (Tagore 31)." After her contact outside of her domestic sphere, Bimala is empowered. She is drawn towards Sandeep. Nikhil gives her the freedom of choice. He explains his reasoning, "No, No, it was not a generous impulse, nor indifference. I had simply come to understand that never would I set free until I could set free. To try to keep Bimala as a garland round my neck would have meant keeping a weight hanging over my heart. Have I not been praying with all my needs must be my lot, let it come; but let me not be kept in bondage. To clutch hold of that, which is true as though it were true, is only to throttle oneself. May I be saved from such self-destruction (Tagore 134)." Nikhil does not attempt to possess Bimala, although she is his wife. Instead, he sets her free. Nikhil's decision shows his modern thinking and sets him apart from Sandeep. It is ironic as well, because

Sandeep is revering Bimala as a goddess, but it is Nikhil who gives her the control to practice her agency.

Bimala's intellect and confidence shine during a dinner, which the three of them have together when the three argue over freedom, passion, and current events. At this time, Nikhil questions Bimala's love for him. "Did the love which I received from her, I asked myself, come from the deep spring of her heart, I asked myself, or was it merely like the daily provision pipe water pumped up by the municipal steam engine of the society (Tagore 41)?," he says to indicate his shock when Bimala's infatuation for Sandeep is prominent in the dinner the night before. This scene allows Bimala to share her views intellectually with the two men in her life. She is assertive, compelling, and supports the Swadeshi movement siding with Sandeep:

I am only human. I am covetous. I would have good things for my country. If I am obliged, I would snatch them and filch them. I have anger. I would be angry for my country's sake [...] I would make my country a Person, and call her Mother, Goddess, Durga- for whom I would redden the earth with sacrificial offerings. I am human, not divine (Tagore 38).

Bimala's strong and assertive personality stuns both men. A woman, who was supposed to be within her private sphere, challenges her husband's ideologies in front of his friend. She also uses her anger to invoke Goddess Durga. Tagore uses Goddess Durga, who is a symbol of strength and independence in order to show Bimala's newfound independence. Her many facades reflect power and dominance to triumph over evil demons. Durga puja is an important part of the Bengali Culture. Alex Wayman's "Climatic Times in Indian Mythology" discusses the importance of the Durga Puja in Calcutta:

In Calcutta. where the Durga-puja is an all-out effort of the people, images of Durga (the fierce form of Parvati) are flanked on the right by ones of Ganega and Laksmi and on the left by ones of Sarasvati and Karttikeya (Ganesa is the son of Parvati, and Karttikeya the son of Siva). (Wayman 305)

Durga is an important Goddess in the Bengali culture. Therefore it is no surprise when Bimala is compared to Durga.

Eventually Bimala steals from her husband after being persuaded by Sandeep when he asks her for money. He compels her to take the money from Nikhil. Her decision to steal from her husband shows the effect (albeit negative), the reforms for women's status was having on common women. They were being pushed to enter an arena, which was unfamiliar to them. In addition, Bimala's freedom causes her to deviate and instead, she becomes Sandeep's pawn in his fight for freedom:

[Sandeep] 'Is not his money yours as well?'

[Bimala] 'Ah no!' she said, her wounded pride hurt afresh [...]

'But how am I to get it?' she repeated

[Sandeep] Get it you shall and must. You know best how. You must get it for Her to whom it rightfully belongs. Bande Mataram! These are the magic words which will open the door of his iron safe, break through the walls of his strong-room, and confound the hearts of those who are disloyal to his call. Say Bande Mataram, Bee!

[Sandeep] 'Bande Mataram' (Tagore 115)

Although Bimala seems to have her own identity in the public sphere who is able to fight for her beliefs, she is eventually controlled by Sandeep who uses both Nikhil and her for his means to participate in the Swadeshi movement. Sandeep is the antagonist of the novel and his actions are evident of this attribute. Therefore, the complexity of Bimala's decision to not only impose her agency, but be coaxed by Sandeep shows Tagore's ambivalence on a woman's capacity to practice her agency.

Mohammad Quayam 's "Review of Rabindranath Tagore: *Ghare Baire*" asserts that "what was conceived as a non-violent non-cooperation movement soon turned violent and ugly, owing to the heavy handed policies of the government, and wilful meddling by self-seeking and sinister bhadrolks. Tagore felt mortified by many of the nationalist leaders behaving like terrorists and traumatising innocent people for their indifference to the cause, and impassioned youths turning to the cult of the bomb to liberate their homeland from the foreign yoke." Tagore's views were aligned with Nikhil, who becomes the victim of Sandeep's nationalism. His abhorrence of the nationalist movement is reflected in Sandeep's malevolent and conniving character. Sandeep not only uses Nikhil financially, but also woos his wife in front of him. Bimala is also drawn to the refreshing passion that Sandeep offers by giving her an elevated identity. Bimala's freedom, which Nikhil bestows upon her, turns into the sheer cause of shame for her. Her attraction towards Sandeep leads to her husband's moral injury. Problems arise when she steals money from Nikhil for him. She begins to see Sandeep as a devil:

This demon, in the guise of a god, had come with his ruddy torch to call me that day, saying, 'I am your Country, I am your Sandip. I am more to you than

anything else of yours. Bande Mataram!' And with folded hands I had responded:
'You are my religion. You are my heaven. Whatever else is mine shall be swept
away before my love for you. Bande Mataram (Tagore 141)!'

Bimala is taken aback by Sandeep and his power over her decisions. He causes her to defy her duty as the perfect wife within both the public and private spheres. In the end, Bimala's decision to steal shows her docile nature, caused by the storm led by the Swadeshi movement. However, simultaneously, it also shows Tagore's faith in the potential of women to make their own choices. Therefore, indicating the early signs of progress, which were taking place between 1900s and 1930s.

In conclusion, Sarala Devi was the descendant of the Tagore family. She was encouraged by her family to receive an institutionalized education at Bethune School, which was "the center of learning for the girls from 'enlightened' and 'progressive' families (Ray 7)." Sarala was one of the first women who had BA degrees in 1883 and opted to study Science when women were encouraged to study humanities. Eventually, she was to become a patriot and differed from her uncle, Rabindranath Tagore who was against the notion of the political leader as a hero. Sarala "contended that a political leader had to be judged politically (Ray 11)." It is the notion, which Tagore argues against in the form of Sandeep. Sarala Devi is the woman who is comfortable in the public sphere unlike Bimala, whom Tagore shaped to become suspended between the two adverse ideologies. The tension between the two ideologies is strained and eventually breaks Bimala apart and leaves her without her "home" and "world." Her "home" is represented by Nikhil, who is fatally injured when he tries to protect an Indian's family during the time of Hindu-Muslim riots. Sandeep is emblematic of her "world," and ignites passion in her, which is

directed towards nationalism. He also leaves the city at the end of the novel. However, unlike Sarala Devi and the other women of the Tagore household who had a unique privilege and luxury of education and equality especially the generations after Tagore's, Bimala represents the common woman whose husband is ideal, enlightened, and encourages free choice and thought. According to Ray, the new "model of grihhalakshmi (goddess of the home) was developed in a mixture of the old and the new to suit men intellectually colonized, but emotionally rooted to the Indian tradition (Ray 39)." However, this new model in the form of Bimala is jeopardized by the presence and influence of Sandeep, who represents the antithesis of the notions, which Tagore believed in. However, through the allegory of Nikhil and Sandeep, he is not only able to portray this conflict, but show the seeds of progress in women's status that were being planted during the early 20th century Calcutta.

After the *Swadeshi* movement, women then became a major part of Gandhi's *Satyagraha* movement. Women such as Swarnalata and Shakuntala in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* are part of this movement. Their participation reveals the emancipation of women during the time period between 1930 and 1947.

The Status of Women in 1940s Pre-Partition (1947) in *Difficult Daughters*

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughter's* novel maps the lives of women, who attempt to create an identity for themselves during the time period when India was politically unstable and undergoing a major historical catastrophe, the Partition of 1947. There are many important notions Kapur investigates in the novel such as education, marriage, and polygamy. It is centered on the life of Virmati, the female protagonist, who struggles to form an independent identity for herself, but fails after falling in love with a married man. The notion of education is an

important element discussed in the novel, and allows distinction between the two sets of women. Kapur presents the readers with two different categories of women. The traditional women, who adhere to the standards of the society they thrive in, and exercise their agency in a limited fashion. They are juxtaposed the modern women, who not only are aggressive and follow their desires, but also control and impose their agency within the society. Ganga and Kasturi represent the former category, while Swarnalata and Shakuntala are emblematic of the latter category. One such traditional text, although not as influential as other historical texts but vital nonetheless, is *Manusmriti*. It has directly or indirectly defined the role of women in the Indian society. Swarnalata and Shakuntala challenge the notions he states, while Ganga and Kasturi do not. Virmati, unfortunately, does not belong to either of these categories. She is neither successfully emancipated nor is she able to confine her self in the traditional role expected of her. Virmati is caught up and suspended within the web of the dual nature of the Indian society. Although she tries hard to define her agency within her society, she is unable to carve a strong and independent identity of herself. Although Virmati does not represent the thinking of all the women during the Partition era, she is a woman trying to release herself from a woman's traditional role in the 1940s India. Hence, Virmati is symbolic of "the contradictory progress and non-progress with regards to women and gender roles"²³ in the Indian society.

The novel begins with the introduction of Kasturi, Virmati's mother, conversing with her sister-in-law. The narrator of the novel is Ida, Virmati's daughter, who returns to Punjab to explore her roots and learn about her mother. *Difficult Daughters* also depicted in a series of flashbacks, in which, we get a glimpse of the life Virmati led as a student in Amritsar. Her torrid affair with Harish, a married professor, influences the decisions she makes throughout her life. Harish is unhappy with Ganga, his wife because she is illiterate. He wants an intellectual

companion instead of an uneducated one as education is a part of his identity. His search is complete when he comes across, his neighbor, Virmati. He falls head over heels in love with her, eventually exchanging love letters with her, and pressurizing her to break her engagement with the man chosen for her by her family. Virmati falls prey to his desires and ruins her family's reputation. As a consequence, she is sent to Lahore to study. There, she carries on the illicit affair frequently meeting him and finally become pregnant with his child, whom she aborts quietly.

Virmati tries numerous times to break away from him in order to become independent, but Harish's love and obsession impedes her. Instead, she becomes a second wife to him, trying to forge an importance within his household. However, Ganga continues to perform her household chores and wifely duties, whereas Virmati only performs her "wifely" duties in the night. Tired of the rejection from his family, she decides to study for her masters. The Partition acts as a catalyst to change the situation of Harish's household. It forces Virmati to return from Lahore, while Ganga and Harish separate. Harish and Virmati start a new life in Delhi, where Harish is offered a position in the Delhi University while Ganga and Kishori Devi lead a separate life with his children in Kanpur. Ganga continues to live life separate from Harish, but ornaments herself with traditional bindi, bangles, toe rings, and her mangalsutra²⁴ publicly displaying her identity as Harish's wife. Ida concludes, at the end of the novel, that "this book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word like a brick in a mansion I made with my head and heart. Now live in it, Mama, and leave me be. Do not haunt me anymore."²⁵

The women, in the novel, who are traditional like Kasturi and Ganga, remain within the conventions designed by numerous cultural traditions. Although the oppression of Indian women's status is found in many cultural texts, it is codified with particular strictness in the

Manusmriti. While Bimala initially wanted to remain “protected” by her traditions, Swarnalata and Shakuntala defied this notion. Manu has declared that, “Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth, and her sons protect her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence.”²⁶ In other words, a woman can never be independent because she is vulnerable and unable to “protect” herself. Both Swarnalata and Shakuntala are exemplary of the progressive women before the partition in the 1940s. Both these women successfully challenge the role, which their society sets for them. Shakuntala is Virmati’s idol because her life carried responsibilities “beyond a husband and children.”²⁷ Shakuntala complains to her cousin:

These people don’t really understand, Viru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent. Here we are, fighting for the freedom of the nation, but women are still supposed to marry, and nothing else [...] *And* conduct political meetings, join rallies. I wish you could see what all the women are doing in Lahore. But for my mother, marriage is the only choice in life...

(Kapur 15)

Shakuntala is independent and lives her life without any inhibitions and is confident about her identity. Her lifestyle is glamorous. Virmati watched “her ride horses, smoke, play cards and badminton, act without her mother’s advice, buy anything she wanted without thinking it a waste of money, casually drop in on all the people the family knew. Above all, she never seemed to question or doubt herself in anything.”²⁸ Shakuntala’s behavior is viewed with contempt and disdain especially within her own family. Because she smokes, disobeys her mother, and acts as she pleases, her behavior is viewed as manly. She also does not comply with the standards of her society. She neither depends on her father nor is married. She is self-sufficient and shows no

interest in marriage. Her mother, Lajwanti, complains to Kasturi, “All the time in the lab, doing experiments, helping the girls, studying or going to conferences. I tell her she should have been a man.”²⁹ Shakuntala’s unmarried state is a subject of concern for Virmati’s family, especially for her mother, Kasturi. Shakuntala’s transformation after becoming an educator is viewed with disdain and disapproval. Kasturi criticizes with contempt, “She’s becoming a mem³⁰ [...] Study means developing of the mind for the benefit of the family. I studied too, but my mother would have killed me if I had dared to even to want to dress in anything other than what was bought for me.”³¹ Virmati’s family views education as a necessary tool, which can make a woman “benefit” the family. In other words, education is an important attribute, but only to a certain extent. If a woman becomes too educated, she is frowned upon even looked with condescension. Swarnalata is another example of a self-sufficient woman. She is Virmati’s roommate in Lahore, when Virmati pursues her B.A. in a local college for women there. Swarnalata also has strong goals in her life, which also look beyond the conventions of marriage:

“They had no choice,” Swarna arched her eyebrows, totally in control of her life.

‘I was very clear that I wanted to do something besides getting married. I told my parents if they would support me for two more years I would be grateful.

Otherwise I would be forced to offer Satyagraha with other Congress workers against the British. And go on offering it until taken to prison. Free food and lodgings at the hands of the imperialists (Kapur 107).

Swarnalata is passionate and fanatical about the *Satyagraha* movement. Like Shakuntala, her independence has a purpose. She is similar to Shakuntala, and encourages Virmati to become self-sufficient. She says that “marriage is not the only thing in life, Viru. The war-the Satyagraha

movement-because of these things, women are coming out of their homes. Taking jobs, fighting, going to jail. Wake up from your stale dream (Kapur 139).” Hence, both Swarnalata and Shakuntala practice their agency and impose it on the society, without worrying about the consequences of their action. They are strong and aggressive in their role and confident of their respective identities.

Conversely, both Kasturi and Ganga are strict followers of tradition. They follow the customs and act accordingly to the role, which has been assigned to them. Ganga, for example, remained illiterate, because of her family’s upbringing that did not impose education as a necessary pre-requisite for a successful threshold:

The woman’s own mother had never read, nor ever felt the need. She had taught the woman everything she knew. By the time she was ready to leave for her husband’s house at the age of twelve, she had mastered the basic items of a pure vegetarian diet. She was quick and inventive with the embroidery and knitting needle, as well as with the sewing machine. After her marriage, her mother-in-law made sure she learned that she learned the ways of her in-law’s household from the moment of her arrival. All of this was part of growing up, she knew, but how was she ever to dream without the desire to read and write, she was going to be defenseless into union with a man so unlike the other s she knew, who didn’t seem to care about her household skills at all (Kapur 37).

Ganga had learned the arts of the threshold, but was married to a progressive husband. Kapur’s creation of Ganga allows her to discuss many social overtones such as childhood marriage as

Ganga had been prepared to manage a household since the tender age of twelve. However, Ganga's skills are futile and are unable to attract Harish.

Problems arise when Harish gains interest in Virmati, who is one of his students, and loses further interest in Ganga. However, Ganga does not implement her agency and passively accepts his decision. Ganga "herself distrusted books, they had caused her much misery, but as the Professor's wife she was hardly in a position to say so. It was just the whole business involved so many other things as well. Students at all hour, students beginning to be dissatisfied with life the way it was, with the brides their parents had chosen."³² Ganga felt uneasy of the "business" of teaching and education, because it constantly reminded her of the difference between her and her husband and it was the lack of education, which made her seem inadequate in his eyes. While she could have left him during his affair with Virmati, she was bound to traditions. Ida always addresses Ganga as the "woman" throughout the novel with an unsympathetic tone. There is an instance in the novel, when Virmati attempts suicide, due to the confusion she is in. Ganga passively and obediently acts as Harish tells her to do so, however, she does not vocalize to him that it was "her right, to be able to cook for her family, to be left in peace to fuss over their eating habits, to cater to their dislikes and dislikes, to do just what Kasturi was doing with their daughters."³³ Ganga's world revolved around her family. Like Kasturi, there was no need for her to look beyond her necessary duties. She looked up to Kasturi, Virmati's mother. Because education was becoming viewed as a means of freedom for younger girls, both Kasturi and Ganga conflicted with the new ideas developing around them. They did not understand the methodology of education because both suffered losses of their own due to it. Ganga lost her husband to Virmati, while Kasturi's family name was blackened after Virmati's affair with Harish.

Kasturi, unlike Ganga, however was educated to a certain limit. She is Ganga's role model and has never strayed away from the traditions and customs expected of her. She, like a devoted daughter, married according to her parent's wishes. She had married into a "good family", where her educated nature was appreciated:

Kasturi was indignant. Did they think any kitchen work was beyond her? She came from a good family where girls were thought housekeeping from the time they could walk; All of a sudden Kasturi felt grateful to her mother for those long hours she had spent into the kitchen, cutting [...] stirring, and frying (deep plus shallow) It paid to know these things (Kapur 188).

Kasturi viewed education as a quality, which made her a better candidate as a wife in her husband's family. Immediately after her marriage, she was praised by her new family members. People praised her and complimented that for her father-in-law "only an educated bride would do for his son."³⁴ Kasturi is particular about the role of a woman as well as one's duty towards their family and society. She is angry and bewildered with Virmati's aberrant decisions especially after refusing the man she had chosen for her. She screams out of frustration and anger, "If you consider your duty to us, at least consider your self. There is a time in the cycle of life for everything. If you willfully ignore it like this, what will happen to you? A woman without her own home and family is a woman without moorings (Kapur 102)." Kasturi's values are cemented and adhere to the social standards expected in the society.

Virmati does not belong to the neither the assertive and strong women like Shakuntala and Swarnalata, nor is she able to follow the traditional role she is expected of. Virmati's aspiration is to become more like Shakuntala and Swarnalata. Virmati acquires education and

completes her B.A. in Lahore and even plans to attend Shantiniketan, the famous Rabindranath Tagore school, in Calcutta. However, at each point in her life, when she encounters freedom, which allows her to practice a similar agency her cousin and friend practice, Harish's presence in her life impedes her decisions she makes:

Am I free, thought Virmati. I came here to be free, but I am not like these women. They are using their minds, organizing, participating in conferences, politically active, while my time is spent being in love. Wasting it. Well, not wasting time, no, of course not, but then how come I never have a moment for anything else? Swarna does. And she even has a 'friend', who lives in the city. Thank God Hari lives in Amritsar. Otherwise I would be completely engulfed. But isn't that what I want. What'll happen when we marry? (Kapur 131).

Virmati wants to have a life, which is able to fulfill her career as well as expectations she has about her love life. In the passage above, it is one of the few moments, that the readers are able to look into Virmati's dilemmas. While she knows that she has opportunities to become fully independent despite ruining her family's name (because of her refusal to marry Inderjeet), Harish continues to control the major aspects of her life. Because of the nature of Harish and Virmati's relationship, Virmati is unable to become independent like Swarna and her "friend." Virmati is self-conscious and aware of her desires to become as active as Swarnalata, however, she is unable to act on them. She finds her self "wasting time" and unlike the other women, she is not "using" her mind and "organizing, participating in conferences," and neither is it "politically active." Virmati, in conclusion, represents the confusion women were undergoing during this time. There is a struggle to gain an agency within the traditional society in Punjab before the

years leading to the partition. She is emblematic of the transition, women were undergoing before the Partition.

As a side note, not all relationships which involved an educated man and illiterate woman such as Harish and Ganga failed. Afore mentioned couple, Mahadev Govind Ranade and his second wife, Ramabai Ranade's relationship had similar characteristics. Ranade was an educated English professor whereas Ramabai was illiterate and only eleven years of age during her marriage. However, she went on to become one of the known empowered women, who worked to make a difference in the lives of abused women in India. Now I will discuss Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé*. I consider this novel to represent the contemporary condition of women in India.

The Contemporary Status of Indian Women in *Ladies Coupé*

Unlike in *The Home and The World* and *Difficult Daughter*, where both protagonists use education as a means, by which they try to break out of their conventional role, the heroine of *Ladies Coupé* is independent due to the circumstances she experiences. Her marriage is no longer considered important because she has to take care of her mother and siblings becoming the "man" of the house. Unfortunately, her family members, especially her younger sister, Padma, who is ungrateful to her and even condemns her in front of her friends:

'She is not like us. She is not interested in any of the things that give us or any normal person pleasure. She likes to be left alone [...]' Padma's voice bore just the right inflection to suggest misery at the hands of a callous older sister [...] 'I don't know sometimes I think she isn't even a practicing Hindu. She won't light the lamp in the puja room or go to the temple or observe any of the rituals we

brahmins do. When she has her periods, she continues to water the plants and if I object, she bites my head (Nair 174).’

Padma gossips about her sister in front of her friends. Akhila’s life has been spent devoted to her siblings and mother as she has been the breadwinner of the family. Yet, none of her siblings have reciprocated her devotion and have taken her for granted. Instead, her younger sister does not allow her to act independently in her house and complains of Akhila’s presence in her household. When Akhila declares, influenced by her friends who encourage her to live alone, her siblings do not receive the news well:

Narsi [her younger brother] - It’s improper for a woman to live alone. What will society say? That your family has abandoned you. Besides, there will be a whole lot of questions that will pop up about your reputation. You know how people put two together and come up with five. Nalini [Akhila’s sister-in-law]’s family will be scandalized if they hear about this. Have you thought of how embarrassing my position will be?

Padma- Why do you have to live alone? Haven’t I taken care of your house for you? Apart from everything that Narsi Anna [older brother] has said, have you thought about the expenses? I have two girls and my husband doesn’t have a very well-paying job. I was counting on your help to get my girls married and settled in their lives (Nair 216-7)

Her demand for an independent life is discarded by her siblings, who continue to care about their own selfish needs and desires, without showing concern and consideration for their sister. In addition to her family, Akhila had a brief affair with Hari, whom she meets on the bus daily on

the way to her work. Unfortunately, because he is younger than her, she decides to abandon him after getting conscious of her peculiar relationship with him:

‘Everything is wrong, Hari [...] All these days, I tried to tell myself that it didn’t matter. That we could bridge the years between us with our love. But I don’t think I can. Every time I look at someone watching us, I can see the question in their minds: what is he doing with an older woman? That bothers me very much, Hari. It bothers me very much that we are not suited (Nair 162)

She also leaves him so that she can comply with the normal standards of her society. Frustrated and Irritated, Akhila decides to escape to Kanyakumari.

Akhila is forty-five years old, single, breadwinner and backbone of her ruthlessly demanding family. Set in contemporary Southern India, Nair isolates six women and give each of them a chance to answer the key question of the novel, which Akhila poses, “Can a woman cope alone?”³⁵ The remaining ladies in the coupé are taken aback by this idea – living without the support of a male authority is [generally] a taboo in India – their reactions are evident of this taboo. The characters of the novel are from different walks of life trying to juggle their lives with the desire for independence and their duty to conform into the expected role of the Indian society. The ladies coupé is a special allocated cabin for women in India, where if they are travelling on a journey (sometimes for long hours), they can be in the company of other women. The cabin allowed them to separate themselves from unfamiliar men as well as women travelling alone. According to Haidar Eid, the coupé “becomes a metaphor for a utopian world that is liberated from patriarchy, one that is not characterized by false binaries.”³⁶ In other words, the coupé allows these women a free medium to vent their true feelings of their current situation in their lives without their husbands and brothers hovering over them and compelling them to wear

a mask in front of the society. In addition, they are not judged by the other women in the coupé. The coupé almost acts as a vacuum allowing these six women to freely discuss their situations:

Suddenly it didn't matter. Akhila knew she could tell these women whatever she chose to. Her secrets, desires, and fears. In turn, she could ask them whatever she wanted. They would never see each other again...Foetuses jostling within the walls of a womb, drawing sustenance and from each other's lives, aided by the darkness outside and the fact that what was shared within the walls wouldn't go beyond this night or the contained space (Nair 21-3).

In the novel, we are introduced to Janaki, Margaret Shanti, Prabha Devi, Sheela, and Marikolantu. The name Janaki is also an alternate name of the Goddess Sita in one of the most famous epic of India, the *Ramayana*.³⁷ Janaki, in the novel, is a foil to Akhila. She complies with the expectations her society and family have for her. Akhila, on the other hand, through unforeseen circumstances has reached independence. While the other stories of the women in the novel are heart-wrenching and enduring, the contrast between Akhila and Janaki is intriguing and illustrates “the contradictory progress and non-progress with regards to women”³⁸ in modern India. Marriage is the central notion of the novel.

Despite several reforms for women in India, the nature of their status is still paradoxical. Reverting back to *Manusmriti*, one of the laws, which were mentioned earlier in the study of *Difficult Daughters* and *The Home And The World*, that “In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent (148)” continues to be challenged in this novel. Nair attempts to dispel this social norm, which views women as dependent, weak, and incapable of self-sufficiency through Akhila. Akhila's life was normal until the untimely death of her father when she became “the

man of the family (Nair 81).” His death metamorphosed her role as a daughter to the sole breadwinner of the family responsible for her mother and her siblings. She was nineteen at the time of the tragedy. Her life was swept into the chaos of her responsibilities. She experiences her first set back when her youngest brother, Narsi, wanted to get married. No one objected his marriage or insisted that Akhila should get married before him. Unfortunately, Akhila’s wait for someone to object was futile as their minds had accepted that she had become a spinster:

What Akhila missed the most was that no one ever called her by her name any more. Her brother and sister had always called her Akka. Elder sister. At work, her colleagues called her Madam. All women were Madam and all men Sir. And Amma had taken to addressing her as Ammadi. As though to call Akhila by her name would be an affront to her head-of-the-household status (Nair 90).

Although Akhila is grasping independence, she is losing companionship and her role as a wife and mother. She slowly becomes isolated of her societal roles in order to dedicate her time for the welfare of her family. Marriage, for her, becomes an abstract idea – a role that she has not experienced and has certain stereotypes fit in her mind due to her lack of experience. Her mother had played a vital role to shape her notions of marriage at an early age:

It is best to accept that the wife is inferior to her husband. That way, there can be no strife, no disharmony. It is when one wants to prove one’s equality that there is warring and sparring all the time. It is so much easier and simpler one’s station in life and live accordingly. A woman is not meant to take on a man’s role. Or the gods would have made her do so. So what is all this about two equals in a marriage (Nair 14).

Akhila's mother, Amma, has very strong rules that govern the success of marriage. She does not try to rebel against her role in the society and in many ways shapes Akhila's outlook on marriage. At forty-five, Akhila has accepted that her marriage will not occur but simultaneously desires to live by herself after her mother's death. Janaki is the first one to respond to her question when asked if a woman can cope independently.

Janaki has been married for forty years. Her advice or response to Akhila echoes aforementioned law of Manu:

I am a woman who has always been looked after. First there was my father and my brothers; then my husband. When my husband is gone, there will be my son. Waiting to be taken from where his father left off. Women like me end up being fragile. Our men treat us like princesses. And because of that we look down upon women who are strong and who can cope by themselves (Nair 24)

There is a truth to her statement. Janaki has habitually followed the society's expectations. She married her husband, Prabhakar, at eighteen in an arranged marriage. She was "groomed" (Nair 26) for this step in her life. However, unlike the epic *Ramayana*, where Sita is subservient and devoted to her husband, Rama, Janaki in contrast to Sita's character and personality. Janaki dominates her household while Prabhakar adheres and complies with her needs and wants. Prabhakar is understanding of Janaki's mood swings. He was understanding of her weaknesses but even when "the beating of his heart slowed him down, sometimes it crashed in his ears, but he didn't forget his place as a husband, father, and provider. She didn't think he loved her any less because of her mood swings. He just understood-an understanding person always suffers (Nair 33)." Janaki is "spoilt"³⁹ and pampered by her husband, which causes a clash between her

son, Siddhartha and Prabhakar later on. She is moody, irritated, and yet her husband tolerates her erratic behavior protecting her from her son and other problems she faces.

Nair's role reversal between Rama and Sita shows an artificial and a positive outlook on the progress of women. Unlike in the *Ramayana*, where Sita is banished from the Ayodhya's court, although she is devoted to Rama, Prabhakar tolerates Janaki's ill behavior towards him and her family. Linda Hess's "Rejecting Sita: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man's Cruel Treatment of His Ideal Wife" article discusses the plight of Sita through the flames, which test her purity in front of the entire court:

A suspicion has arisen with regard to your conduct, and your presence is as painful to me as a lamp to one whose eye is diseased. Henceforth, go where you like, I give you leave, oh *Janaki*. Beautiful one, the ten directions are at your disposal. I'll have nothing more to do with you. What man of honor would indulge his passion so far as to take back a woman who has dwelled in the house of another? You have been taken into Ravana's lap, and he has looked lustfully at you. How can I, who boast of belonging to an illustrious lineage, reclaim you? My goal in reconquering you has been achieved. I no longer have any attachment to you. Go where you like. . . . Go to Lakshmana or Bharata, Shatrughna, Sugriva, or the demon Vibhishana. Make your choice, whoever pleases you most. Surely Ravana, seeing your ravishing, celestial beauty, did not respect your body when you dwelled in his house (Hess)

These words belong to Rama. He has rescued Sita from the clutches of Ravana in an epic battle. However, because she had lived with Ravana during her capture, she is deemed impure thereafter. Sita's alternate name, Janaki, is used interchangeably in the *Ramayana*. Rama is

portrayed as the domineering man who lives for his people than his family. Although he fights the battle to rescue Sita, he abandons her and depletes any “attachment” to her. He also assumes that because she is a “celestial beauty,” Ravana would not “have respected” her body. In other words, Ravana would have violated her purity. Hess uses Valmiki’s version of the *Ramayana*, which shows the rejection of Sita from his court. Tulsi Das’s *Ramayana* alters the ending. She continued to be the devoted wife after their arrival back to Avadh:

Sita was ever obedient to her lord, incomparable in her beauty, her virtue and her meekness, sensible of the majesty of the All-merciful and devotedly attached to his lotus feet. Though there were many man-servants and maidservants in the palace, all well-skilled in their work, she discharged every domestic duty with her own hands, waiting on Rama's orders. Any service that might give pleasure to the All-merciful she herself studied to perform. Without the slightest pride or conceit she attended on Kausalya and the other queen dowagers in the palace (Growse 638)

Sita is portrayed as an obedient and devoted wife who was “devotedly attached to his [Rama’s] feet,” whose actions belong to Rama. Although it is debatable about her plight after her banishment from Rama’s court, the center of her world is Rama. Her identity is based on Rama. Throughout Tulsi Das’s *Ramayana*, Sita is described as “obedient,” “meek” and “devotedly attached to his lotus feet.” Nair’s Janaki is quite the opposite. She is the dominating force of her house. Prabhakar is tolerant of her mood swings and is caught in the middle of the fights between Janaki and their son, Siddhartha. Siddhartha recognizes his mother’s dependence and pampering from the men in the family and criticizes her dependency on them:

You are spoilt. Everyone you know has spoilt you. Your family and then Dad.

You are such a princess. You want everything done your way. And if someone doesn't do it the way you want it done, you know how to sulk and get them to do it. I can't help but compare you to Jaya [his wife]'s mother. I see how generous she is: how she is willing to give all of herself to her children. You don't do that.

When have you ever thought of anyone but yourself (Nair 38)?

Siddhartha views her dependence on her family and his father as a weakness. Janaki is also not portrayed as a wife who has melted into her role as a wife and mother. Instead, she has watched her life mechanically pass by. In defense to her character, her marriage at the delicate age of eighteen hinders her to become worldly and step out of the boundaries created by her marriage. She is infantilized by not only her father, but also her husband and son. Her personality as a woman who has always been under the shadow of her family and husband has made her "pampered" and "spoilt." In another words, she has created a world of her own. However, unlike Sita, Janaki is the domineering woman in her marriage despite conforming to the role of the society. Akhila, on the other hand, experiences a different life. She is eventually not depending on anyone else but herself to take care of her family and provide welfare for her family. By doing so, she loses her conventional status in the society and is restricted to a single life.

In conclusion, we examined the lives of Janaki and Akhila. Both women were foils to each other. Janaki was brought up in such a way that she would be unable to survive on her own after forty years of marriage:

What would it be like to sleep alone in a bed and to wake up in a room all by herself? Early mornings, nights. Alone, alone. Please God, Janaki prayed, let me fall asleep so that I don't have to think (Nair 37).

Janaki fears loneliness while Akhila has to deal with her loneliness through her life. The idea of living alone is unimaginable in Janaki's mind. Although she has been an unconventional wife, she still depends on her husband and knows that due to her ruptured relationship with her son, her widowhood will be painful. At the end of the journey, Akhila has a revelation:

And so it was Akhila. Elderly Spinster. Older sister. Once the breadwinner of the family. Still the cash cow.

But Akhila is certain that she won't let her family use her any more. Look at me, she would tell them. Look at me: I'm the woman you think you know. I am the sister you have wondered about. There is more to this Akka. For within me is a woman I have discovered (Nair 284)

Nair ends on a positive note. Akhila has become independent in Kanyakumari, where she usurps the freedom to contact the man; she had sacrificed in order to avoid prejudice by the society she lived in. Unfortunately, Akhila's sacrifice of marriage and companionship for her family and society are futile because none are concerned for her well-being. She realizes that she doesn't want to become a 45-year-old spinster who have a reputation for "primness"⁴⁰, "a meanness around their mouths"⁴¹, and for "self-absorption"⁴². She ends up contacting her beau and is able to hear his voice.

Although there are single women in India, they are looked at with pity and compassion, because they were unable to get married and raise a family as a conventional woman. Akhila is able to impose her agency once she had escaped her familial duties and has refused to depend on her siblings, who have been ungrateful to her for her sacrifice. This dual expectations that the society has for women who on one hand are expected to follow the model of Sita from *Ramayana* as the meek, obedient, and self-sacrificing wife are led to entire life of dependency

whereas women, who take the position of the “man” of the household are expected to remain spinsters all their life. Therefore, though the *Manusmriti* offers a role defined for women in the society, there is no alternative role or expectation on women who have been unable to marry in conventional settings. Sita shows the ideal model of the wife who conforms to the society and her behavior displays many of the ideas discussed in the *Manusmriti*. However, these texts mold the societal expectations on the status of women in the Indian society thus creating a confusing situation for them, which continues to happen to this day, causing them to juggle their role as a householder and as an independent and career-oriented woman giving them a paradoxical status in the Indian society.

Conclusion: Has the Status of Women Progressed in 2009?

The *Ladies Coupé* embodies a certain amount of progress, which the status of woman has made over the years. The ending of the novel, when a forty-five year old woman has achieved agency despite making numerous self-sacrifices for her family is a sign of progress, when she does not have to depend on any body in her life. At the end of the novel, Nair ends with Akhila gathering courage to bring Hari back into her life. Akhila abandons her inhibitions regarding the stigma attached with the odd nature of her relationship with him:

The telephone on the table near the bed rings. Akhila walks towards it. Her heart races. She wonders: could it be him? Hari’s voice is low and cautious; incredulous, too. ‘Hello,’ she says. ‘This is Akhila. Akhilandeswari.’ (Nair 290)

The novel ends in a powerful note. Akhila emphasizes her name towards the end of the novel as if her identity has been resurrected and she has finally able to live for herself and pursue her desires, without the duties she was restricted to before the life-changing journey in the ladies

coupé. Nair's novel is emblematic of the progress, women have made in India. Akhila is strong and independent. She supports her family after her father's unexpected death. Because of the responsibilities placed upon her as the breadwinner of her family, no one expects that Akhila will get married. Instead, her family depends on her for their needs, ignoring her needs and wants. However, the end of the novel is Akhila's triumph and for once, she is able to live by herself without any strings attached.

The novels, *The Home and the World* and *Difficult Daughters*, showcase the gradual progress of the status of Indian women, which is achieved in *Ladies Coupé*. In Tagore's masterpiece, Nikhil forces his wife, Bimala, to step out of the domestic sphere and the moment she does, she is drawn to the fire of the *Swadeshi* movement, ignited by Nikhil friend and rival, Sandeep. Sandeep is symbolic of every notion, which Tagore despised; he is also the "devil", which lures Bimala to betray the trust of her ideal husband by stealing for Sandeep to support her involvement in the *Swadeshi* movement. On one hand, Tagore is definitely suggesting that the *Swadeshi* movement allowed the women a medium, by which they were able to step out of their allocated sphere at home and were able to involve themselves in the force of nationalism, which was sweeping across India, especially in Calcutta. On the other hand, Tagore is ambivalent towards the status of women in India during the era he resided in.

Sandeep reveres Bimala as a Goddess. This is a gender-reversal of a concept of India, where women generally worship their husbands. In this case, Bimala is venerated, which shows that women were no longer viewed as just mothers, daughters, and wives, whose lives revolved around her husband and children, but a woman who is able to impose her agency within the society. Nikhil desires to gain Bimala's love outside of the domestic sphere and therefore, allows

her to step out of the purdah. He is an idealistic man. According to Mohammad Quayum, Nikhil “remains calm, gentle, understanding, forgiving, liberal, rational and altruistic throughout the novel, while Sandip is selfish, manipulative, irrational, oppressive, and tyrannical. Nikhil is so tranquil that he does not lose his poise even when his wife flirts with his friend in his own house, in front of his very eyes”.⁴³In a patriarchal system, Nikhil’s behavior is astonishing. He allows the “world” to enter his “home” through Sandeep’s presence and although he is aware of Bimala’s infatuation of Sandeep, he does not resist their liaison. The ending of the novel is cinematic. Bimala’s realization of her forbidden lust of Sandeep’s obsession of the Swadeshi movement provokes her to steal from her husband. Thereby, she falls from her Goddess-like character. She was elevated to by Sandeep. Ironically also, after failing from her euphoric obsession of Sandeep and the nationalist movement, she falls into Nikhil’s feet after realizing her mistake:

When her storm of grief had abated she sat up. I tried to draw her to my breast, but she pushed my arms away and knelt at my feet, touching them repeatedly with her head, in obeisance. I hastily drew my feet back, but she clasped them in her arms, saying in a choking voice: ‘No, no, no, you must not take away your feet. Let me do my worship (Tagore 199).

Throughout the novel, Bimala is the object of glorification and worship, by both men but at the end, she returns to her role as the traditional wife, who worships her husband. Therefore, Tagore points to the growing movement, which was designed to elevate the status of women. However, there was an air of ambivalence in response to this movement. Hence, Bimala returns to the feet of her husband. Her action symbolizes her return to the duties, she upheld in the domestic sphere

before becoming infatuated with Sandeep. However, Nikhil hesitates her gesture showing his chivalric and broad-minded nature, but Tagore emphasizes that Bimala had made a mistake, when she was drawn to Sandeep. It should not be forgotten that Nikhil wanted to test his relationship with Bimala outside of their domestic space. Unfortunately, Bimala is unable to handle the freedom and is overwhelmed with the veneration she receives and thus steals from him, showing her inadequacy to handle this freedom to act as an independent woman. Hence, Bimala is symbolic of the hesitancy, which many families surely must have faced when their daughters and wives were becoming involved in the Swadeshi movement. However, it was a time of change. This novel represents the ambivalence people were feeling towards the consequences of the movement. It was forcing women to step out of their “home” into the “world.” The title of this novel is representative of the dilemma women at this time were facing, due to the frenzy ignited by the movement.

The *Difficult Daughters*, which observes the decade right after the early 1900s, when the Swadeshi movement was taking place. It was the time when Gandhi’s *Satyagraha movement* was taking place where women joined with Gandhi to oppose the British Raj. Kapur focuses on the life of Virmati, the heroine of the novel, who opposes the traditions of the society in order to become independent. However, before she is able to achieve her own independence in the society, which her cousin, Shakuntala, and friend, Swarnalata experience, she is suspended into an endless cycle, where she experiences independence and incapability to exercise her agency throughout the course of the novel. The ending of the novel shows her ending as a traditional housewife, who has borne, Ida, her daughter and narrator of the novel. Despite many attempts to end the illicit relationship she has with Harish, she is constantly drawn to him. The turning point happens when Harish’s friend finds out that Virmati is leaving for Shantiniketan, Tagore’s

school, because Harish has not made any decision and has been avoiding his marriage to her. Even when his friend tries to persuade his marriage to Virmati, he is hesitant to marry her:

‘What can I do? I am hemmed in and tortured on all sides. I know I have been unfair to her- I know. And yet what can I do?’ Harish turned an agitated face to the poet. ‘Everyone will condemn me, her. My children will never accept it, nor my mother. You know the constraints. Surely, I need not explain myself to you (Kapur 185).’

Harish wants the best of both worlds. While he wants to continue his marriage to Ganga to comply with the traditions, he also wants Virmati in his life. Whenever Virmati tries to remove herself from him, he pursues her to keep her with him. Throughout the novel, there are many instances, which show his unwillingness to let go of her. For example, when Virmati’s marriage is arranged to Inderjit, Harish sends her numerous letters persuading her to break the marriage. When she moves to Lahore to pursue her B.A., he follows her there as well. His friends in Lahore arrange their secret rendezvous, which lands her pregnant. Tired of waiting for him to marry her and divorce Ganga, Virmati decides to join Shantiniketan, which is her last attempt to start a new life for herself, where she can exercise her agency. However, she ends up marrying Harish in unforeseen circumstances. Her marriage to him is not received well and suddenly, she loses her agency she experienced in Lahore attempting to become a part of his family. Eventually, she escapes the uneasy and uncomfortable atmosphere when she decides to pursue her Master’s degree in Lahore. Virmati represents the gradual progress, which was taking place at this time. While there were strong and independent women who were taking part in the Satyagraha movement, women like Virmati who wanted to experience both independence and a

married life, were viewed as having incapability to govern their life. Kapur's book was released in 1998 and unlike Tagore's novel, which was written when the movement was taking place, Kapur creates a problematic character in Virmati to show numerous shades of women, who were affected by the force of the *Satyagraha* movement.

From the progression of the novel, Bimala returns to her husband and falls into his feet after realizing that her infatuation with Sandeep and his ideologies. During her era, women in middle-class India were not able to become educated, but Nikhil provides education for her and wishes that she accept him out of her heart and decision, not because she has to because of the traditions of arranged marriage imposed of her. Virmati's education leads her to have an illicit affair with Harish, who is her teacher. She tries numerous times to break away from his presence, because he wants to make her his companion despite social taboos. Eventually, she ends in a polygamous marriage with him until the Partition, when Ganga and Harish are separated. However, she is never as successfully "independent" as her cousin, Shakuntala, and Swarnalata. Education allows women to become stronger and aware of the events happening beyond the responsibilities they had as a housewife. Finally, Akhila's decision to overcome social taboos in pursuit of her love, Hari at the end is evidence of her agency, which she has gained after leaving her responsibilities and ungrateful family members to live her life, the way she wants to.

Although all these characters we have discussed have experienced some agency, the situation of women in India is much better than it was in the 19th century. However, due to the lack of education available to all women in India, especially in remote villages in India, women are wholly unable to impose their agency. Nair's use of the name Janaki to discuss the story of a stereotypical wife is evidence of *Ramayana's* effect on culture. Sita's character as the demure

and obedient wife is still revered culturally. The famous Law of Manu, which was highlighted in the study of the novels, continues to become an important part of the Indian culture. Since independence, the role of women has become expansive within the Indian society and Elizabeth Bumiller's sociological study, *May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons*, is evidence of it. Since Rammohan Roy, there have been many feminists activists in India. Women like Vina Mazumdar, Ramabai Ranade, Aparna Sen, Deepa Mehta, and many more, are making a difference in India showcasing the plight of many societal issues, which women face in India. No longer are women bound to child marriages, or are being burned into the pyre. Although their situation is much better than it was in the 19th century, women continue to be in the 20th and 21st century in India are in a paradoxical situation.

End Notes

- ¹ Jyotsna Kamat's article "India's Freedom Struggle" documents on Sarojni Naidu's life.
- ² Anita Desai's Introduction pg. 8
- ³ Bankim Chanda Chaterjee
- ⁴ Fane 54
- ⁵ Tharakan 117
- ⁶ Fane 57
- ⁷ The Ramayana extracted from wikipedia.com
- ⁸ The description of Manusmriti from V. Jayaram's webpage on the sacred text
- ⁹ Tharakan 119
- ¹⁰ Bumiller 17
- ¹¹ Bumiller 18
- ¹² Bumiller 20
- ¹³ Anita Desai's Introduction in The Home and the World page 8
- ¹⁴ Ibid,
- ¹⁵ Ibid
- ¹⁶ "grihhalakshmi" or "grihh" or Sanskrit word for House and "Lakshmi" is the Goddess of Wealth, usually associated with new brides.
- ¹⁷ Ray 32

¹⁸ Ray 6

¹⁹ Ray 4

²⁰ Ray 5

²¹ Ray 38

²² Tagore 109

²³ Amardeep Singh's article regarding the Difficult Daughters.

²⁴ Mangalsutra is a necklace worn to indicate the marital status of Indian women. It can be either a gold chain or a string of black beads. It would be considered similar to a wedding ring. Along with the mangalsutra, toe rings, kumkum (red powder also known as sindoor), bangles, and a nose ring are signs of a married woman.

²⁵ Kapur 259

²⁶ *The Laws of Manu*

²⁷ Kapur 14

²⁸ Kapur 14

²⁹ Kapur 14

³⁰ mem is a derogatory term assigned to women, who wanted to assimilate and behave like western women.

³¹ Kapur 14

³² Kapur 42

³³ Kapur 73

³⁴ Kapur 188

³⁵ Nair 23

³⁶ Eid, Haidar

³⁷ Indian Hindu Names starting with "J"

³⁸ Singh, Amardeep

³⁹ Nair 38

⁴⁰ Nair 284

⁴¹ *ibid*,

⁴² *ibid*,

⁴³ Quayum, Mohammad

*According to Oxford English Dictionary, Dravidians were “of or pertaining to a non-Aryan people found in southern India and Sri Lanka, or their languages.

* John Marshall was responsible for the excavation of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. He was educated at Dulwich College as well as King’s College in Britain. He was appointed Director-General of Archaeology by Lord Curzon within the British India administration. His work revealed not only the Indus Civilization, but also excavations of the Mauryan era when Asoka was the king.

* Purdah was a screen that was used to segregate and “protect” women from the rest of the world and men.

* Rammohan Roy was the founder of Bramho Sabha, which was a reformed form of Hinduism. After a career in the British East India Company, he turned to the religious reforms. He is most renowned for his abolition of sati, the practice of forceful burning of a widow in her husband’s funeral pyre. The Bramho Samaj society was established in 1828 and promoted monotheism, denounced Hindu rituals, and fought for the eradication of the practice of sati, polygamy, and favored the inheritance rights for women. Maharishi Debendranath Tagore, the father of Rabindranath Tagore, revived Bramho Sabha, which had fallen apart after the Rammohan Roy’s death.

* Mahadev Govind Ranade was a reformist, teacher, and journalist. In 1869, he became a part of a Widow Remarriage Association. He was not only a judge, but also a revolutionary. He graduated from Bombay University and was known as the “Prince of Graduates.” He was a professor of English and Economics. He opposed untouchability, child marriage, and Sati. He also fought for the right of women’s education as well as equality of a woman’s rights. He also influenced as well as educated his then-illiterate young wife Ramabai, who was also to become an advocate of woman’s rights. She was also a social reformer. Due to her husband’s influence, she developed an avid lover of literature and established the “Hindu Ladies Social and Literary Club” and encouraged women to develop language skills, tailoring, and handiwork. After her husband’s death, she advocated “for women’s education, legal rights, equal status, and general awakening. She encouraged them to enter the nursing profession. At that time, this profession was not looked up on as service-oriented and was considered as a taboo for women”.

*Vina Mazumdar refers to herself as the “grandmother of women studies in India.” She is known as the author of the “Towards Equality” report, which changed the course of the women’s movement in India. She is also the co-founder of Center for Women’s Developmental Studies in Delhi, India. She was born in a middle-class Bengali family and grew up in a family, which encouraged the value of education. She studied at a Diocesan Girls school, which was run by the British Protestant Mission. She graduated from the Benares Hindu University. She went to Oxford in the 1960s and completed her bachelors and doctorate in the 1970s. She has taught Political Science in Patna University and has been involved in the Patna University Teacher’s Association as the General Secretary. She was appointed to the Committee on the Status of Women in India, by the government in 1971. Vina was the member secretary in this committee. It was during the early 1970s, when the committee was given an extended year to work on the report, which was discussed in the Parliament. The text of “Towards Equality” is considered the “founding text” of the resurgent women’s movement.

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