CONCLUSION

In this study the concepts of ‘womanhood’ and ‘feminism’ are defined. The ‘concept of womanhood’ refers to the state of woman, the ‘concept of feminism’ is broader in scope as it concerns itself with the position of women in society and their relation to men in all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal, and artistic. It also indicates that ‘womanhood’ is essentially concerned with the personal or individual characteristic traits of a woman, which are believed to be biological, intellectual, and cultural. A woman is identified as the opposite of man and described as passive, meek, timid, emotional, and conventional. These concepts are therefore interrelated.

The social history of feminism both as an ideology and a movement goes back to the eighteenth century and beyond. Thus an account about the position of women in the Western society throughout the past two centuries or so is given and light is thrown on the struggle women underwent to establish themselves as fully independent human beings in their respective societies. It is shown how they overcame the barriers put for them in such a patriarchally dominated society. One also learns about achievements got in this regard, and how this movement affected the various political, religious, economic, cultural, societal, familial, and artistic spheres.

It is observed that the European women started thinking about women and their rights before the French Revolution. Hence they questioned the established social norms and came up with advanced radical views about the
rights of women. This intellectual movement was not merely led by men like Rousseau, Montesquieu, Voltaire and Kant, but women also tried to assert themselves and speak about women's rights. It was not an easy task for both intellectuals and women activists to carry out their radical activities, as there were so many obstacles in their way. But, the factors that helped them tackle all these were some Utopian movements; such as the Fourierists, St. Simonians and Owenites; which inspired women to carry on their campaign and provided them with platforms to convey their ideas relating to political participation of women; and the existence of new technological advances, such as the penny postage and the transatlantic cable, which enabled the European feminists to initiate correspondence with their American counterparts.

In this respect Mary Wollstonecraft and Charles Fourier played a significant role whose ideas paved the way for the later feminists and inspired them to take further steps in the struggle for freedom. With the emergence of a new breed of feminists like Harriet Martineau, Flora Tristan and John Stuart Mill among others, new possibilities for the movement to transform the existing institutions that excluded women from any realm of society were created.

Further a brief history of feminism in the United States, where it appeared as a well-organised and powerful movement, is given. It led to women's vigorous participation in reform radical movements, especially anti-slavery. It also highlights the roles played by women like Sarah and Angelina Grimke, Abbie Kelly, Lucretia Mott and Luch Stone, whose efforts led to a better understanding of the
women's conditions and the realisation of the first Women's Right Convention in Seneca Falls, New York, 1848.

Though the period that followed the Civil War was a set-back for the women's movement, yet the women activists continued their struggle for freedom to the end. Therefore, many women suffrage organisations came into existence, the most prominent being The National Woman Suffrage headed by Elizabeth Cady Stanon and Susan B. Anthony in 1869. This organization continued to play a significant role for a period of 72 years.

Twentieth century is a period in which the term 'feminism' came into existence for the first time and it divides the long suffrage movement from modern feminism. It led to some major developments which paved the way for the feminist revival in the next decades.

Feminist Literary Criticism defines its nature for in terms of interpretation of literature. It is related to the nature of male and female experiences and is mainly concerned with the representation of women in literature, and their position in society by freeing them from oppressive restraints. It starts with the works of feminism that appeared in the first half of the 20th century, particularly Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own (1929) and Simon de Beauvoir's The Second Sex (1949). These played an important role in the development of feminist literary criticism and influenced, to a great extent, the later works of feminist critics during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Some feminist approaches are referred to in the study of literary texts, like Gender Studies, Marxist Feminist Approach, Psychoanalytical Feminist Approach, and
Minority Feminist Approach. Through these approaches one can study the 'concept of womanhood' held by the writers concerned. The study thus reveals if women play primary or marginal roles in their society. From a Marxist perspective, it attempts to find out whether 'social realism' is found in the texts or not. If so, relations between the two sexes are highlighted. Psychoanalytical approach helps in analyzing the feminine images, the language, the narrative technique and characterization. The study also aims at finding out if the texts also deal with topics relating to the minorities, such as the blacks, the lesbians, children and others.

A historical note on the status of women in the Victorian age is given at the end of the introductory chapter. The section vividly describes the man-woman relationship within and outside the realm of marriage. It further aims at finding out whether these Victorian writers are realistic in their presentation of the female characters and what concept of womanhood each of them held in mind while writing their novels.

The study reveals that George Eliot counter-balances both patriarchy and feminism. Unlike the Bronte sisters, George Eliot does not directly address the Women problem.

A close examination of the central female figures in the major novels of Thackeray, the male-female relationships, and women's position in society as it has been portrayed by the writer reveals that Thackeray was as much concerned as his contemporary female novelists about the plight of women and the miserable position they are given in the patriarchal Victorian society, compared with that of men. It also points out that the author had profound knowledge of
the suffering, subjection, and victimization of women at the hands of their oppressors to frequently highlight their miseries and in a variety of ways. One feels that Thackeray was the only writer who could depict the realities of the Victorian society. In this society, according to Thackeray, there is domination and oppression and no place for human passion and love. It is only wealth and social position that all the characters care for. Women, too, in this patriarchal society, have no value and are treated like slaves.

Thackeray was of the opinion that a woman; whatsoever be her goals, good or bad; should be strong enough to survive in this male-dominated society. A large number of women whom Thackeray depicts in his novels are powerful with aspirations and goals to achieve. None of Thackeray's women, however, can be compared with any of those portrayed by either Charlotte or Ann Bronte. In spite of the fact that they are aspirant, gifted, and even domineering, none of them thinks of opposing or challenging the prevalent patriarchal conventions for improving the painful lot of women and help them to lead an independent life away from men's control, or even articulating a wish for changing their own conditions.

Reading Hardy's novels from a Marxist feminist perspective one finds his novels mostly deal with social problems like marriage, gender, sex, class, motherhood, love, chastity, divorce, etc. Also, Hardy was greatly influenced by the feminist movement of the day. Hardy, one concludes, is the only writer who does not only expose the miseries of woman in his patriarchally-dominated society but also expresses his own views which are radical and even
progressive for the Victorians to comprehend and willingly accept. Hardy was also critical of the unjust matrimonial laws which gave more rights to men than to women and of the conventional views of sexuality. Hardy is also the only writer who highlights the worst kind of oppression and abuse meted out by women in the Victorian era.

Through his well-drawn portraits of women, Hardy has shown his disapproval of the conventionally prescribed ideals of depicting female characters. His concept of women is, thus, both complex and unconventional. His women are more energetic and forceful than his men. In many novels Hardy shows men as overwhelmed rather than overwhelming, dominated rather than domineering, reckless in their relationships with their superior women. Take, for instance, William Boldwood and Gabriel Oak in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Jude in *Jude the Obscure*, and many others.

Despite the fact that many of Hardy's women succeed in achieving their mission in life, many of them prove themselves to be 'androgynous' for the rare potentialities that they possess. Some of them also show themselves to be weak and fall victims to human weaknesses. This, in fact, highlights Hardy's knowledge of the nature of human psyche and proves that he is an expert in the art of character-drawing.

To sum up, the present study shows that all the writers concerned have succeeded in exposing gender-related problems and brilliantly pointed out the inferior position, the subjugation, victimization, and abuse of women at the hands of their male-counterparts in this
patriarchal society. From a Marxist-Feminist point of view, all the six writers are realists as they all, with no exception, portray a life-like world in their novels. They give a realistic picture of the world in their works. They all deal with the social problems that were common in their society like marriage and man-woman relationship within this institution, class conflict, women's education, love, sex, and the miserable position of governesses, etc.

One also finds that all the writers dealt with in this study highlight the plight of the minorities, particularly the children who are mostly ill-treated, neglected and, in some cases, murdered; and some are spoiled and pampered on account of their superior sex. The only case in which a Black has been presented is that of Emily Bronte's Heathcliff, who is believed to be a Negro and who is ill-treated for his inferior position.

Regarding the concept of women, these writers; George Eliot being an exception for none of her gifted and aspirant female protagonists attempt to lead an independent life or possess enough courage or power to resist oppression; share the concept that women should be independent and strong enough to protest against and challenge the prevalent and oppressive patriarchal system of the time and to bring about a change in the painful condition of women in their society. The writers, therefore, presented gifted, aspirant, intellectual and powerful female characters with ambitious desires and objectives. Both Hardy and Thackeray presented domineering women who reflect the concept of womanhood held by their creators. Yet, the writers also portrayed weak women, who are either
oppressed or weak by nature.

The study also shows that Charlotte and Ann Bronte are the writers who consider education as the only solution for women to achieve independence. Also, Charlotte Bronte and William Makepeace Thackeray are those who furnish their texts with highly powerful and feminist passages in which they directly probe the 'Woman Question'. The female protagonists presented by Charlotte and Ann Bronte, unlike those of the other writers, are successful in leading an economically independent life and in marrying husbands of their choice on account of their intellectual superiority which makes them economically independent.

All the writers are concerned with the problems of women for they are initially feminist writers. They all show the influence of feminist movement in one way or the other.