CHAPTER-V
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The content and thrust of women's studies should necessarily be to present a powerful critique of patriarchy and its manifestations in the man-women relationship in our society. A powerful counter-ideology is called for if the pervasive power of the dominant patriarchal ideology is to be shattered. The process of learning, relearning and unlearning is incorporated in and essential to women's studies and is manifesting feminist scholarship and analysis. It questions theories and concepts that do not tally with reality or distort reality and attacks some of the cornerstones of social science theory. The major targets have been the way women's roles and women's images are constructed. The human qualities possessed by the male and female sexes are being interpreted newly, replacing the notion of masculinity and feminity as lying at two ends of a linear continuum. Female biological experiences such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and lactation assisted the assumption of a special female psyche.

John Stuart Mill believes that the liberty of the individual is absolutely necessary for the development of society. According to him, he wrote 'The Subjection of Women' to show:
That the principle which regulates the existing social relations
between two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself and now one of the chief hindrances to human
improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of
perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor
disability on the other.

Mill held the view that women's position is not natural but the result of
political oppression by men. He maintained that the masculine
domination of the family was a corrupting influence, making boys selfish
and girls abject. Feminism, basically, has to be understood in its broadest
sense as referring to an intense awareness of identity as a woman and
interest in feminine problems. It's meaning should not be restricted to the
advocacy of women's rights. According to the feminist doctrine the
subjugation of woman is a central fact of history, a key to most of our
social and psychological disorders. Universally, it maybe acknowledged
that the feminine consciousness is a consciousness of victimization. To
apprehend oneself as a victim, is to be aware of an alien and hostile
external force. It is responsible for the oppressive and stifling sex roles.
Some feminists call this power 'society' or 'system', some call it 'men'.
The consciousness brings a sense of solidarity with other victims. The
cultural, regional and linguistic distinctions abate against this solidarity.
Feminist consciousness is the consciousness of being radically alienated from her world and often divided against herself. It perceives woman as a being who sees herself as victim and whose victimization determines her being in the world as resistance, wariness and suspicion. Woman is immersed in social reality that exhibits to her an aspect of malevolent ambiguity. She is an outsider to her society, to many of the people she loves, and to the still unemancipated elements in her own personality. As suggested in the introductory chapter, ‘writing the self’ for a woman is a matter of negotiating a paradigm which is “The Law of the Threshold”, that denotes a strong sense of that which is inside and that which is out there. The threshold is a real and a symbolic bar marking a critical transition ignored by men who have partaken of both worlds whereas for women, a step over the bar is act of transgression. It has been stated that women are located so precariously that, having crossed the threshold, a women may never re-enter the designated conventional space except by public confession. The alternative is to live in the ‘outer world’ by her irrevocable choice. This law allows multiple existences for men and a single existence for women. Women have been complicit in their gendered roles for a long time until being awakened to the reality of their existence through feminist thought. The social roles of wife, mother, housewife assigned to women go hand in hand with a division into the public and private domains, the first being the sphere considered proper
to men, the second to women. Women become ‘the second sex’ in Simone de Beauvoir’s telling phrase. Milton’s line, “He for God only, she for God in him” could well be cited as an example of the almost universally held assumption that man’s purpose in life is to serve God, the state, society, not least his own self-advancement, while woman’s purpose ‘other’, not merely different, but inferior, lacking. Personality traits are distinguished in terms of polar opposites of masculine and feminine. Men are considered to be bold, strong, assertive, independent, aspiring, rational, logical. Woman on the contrary are considered to be timid, yielding, gentle, dependent, self-sacrificing, emotional, intuitive. Though all cultures claim to praise and value the ‘womanly’ quality, one can cite an equal number of passages denigrating women while the verbal praise masks the actual relegation to a secondary position.

Feminism is an ideology which seeks not only to understand the world but to change it to the advantage of women. Simone de Beauvoir’s phrase ‘the second sex’ with reference to woman cut ice. She opines that woman’s idea of herself as inferior to man and dependant on him springs from her realization that ‘the world is masculine on the whole, those who fashioned it, ruled it and still dominate it today are men. Though the biological distinction between male and female is an accepted fact, the notion that woman is inferior to man is no longer acceptable to women in general and feminists in particular. Simone de Beauvoir asserts that ‘one
is not born but becomes a woman'. The old prejudice against woman as being weaker than man in all respects is also reflected in the language system – particularly in English, one notices the pronoun is largely male-oriented. Now there is not a single position in the society, including administration and government which is not being occupied by woman. Today we have women Presidents, Prime Ministers, Scientists, Commanders, Administrators and what not. Thus, the feminist movement aims at overthrowing social practices that lead to the oppression and victimization of women lock, stock and barrel. It aims at making woman the subject of her own story and not the object of male desire and male satisfaction or a whipping block for male frustration. Women come to realize the inauthenticity of the lives lead and struggle to discover for themselves their own impulses, reactions, desires and needs. Their quest is for self-knowledge and self-realization which can in turn lead to relationships based on mutual understanding and respect. Individual change and social change, both are desired goals, together with an eventual change in male perceptions and attitudes.

No wonder that Helene Cixous has reiterated the demand for self-assertion by women writers and leaders of the feminist movement in unequivocal terms: 'Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. The very concepts of masculinity and femininity are social constructs. Kate Millet in her book,
Sexual Politics maintains that sexual politics is a process whereby the ruling sex seeks to maintain and extend its power over the subordinate sex. She suggests that social and cultural contexts of a work of art should be taken into account in order to understand it in its proper perspective. Gynocritics seek to formulate a female framework for the analysis of women's literature 'to develop new models based on the study of female experience rather than to adopt male models and theories.' Gynocritics take into account the feminist research done in the field of anthropology, history, psychology and sociology to formulate their critical principles. Working as 'gynocritics' women had tried reading male-centered criticism.' The 'feminist critique' involves the feminist as a reader offering different interpretations of the images of women projected in the male created texts. Women writers by way of challenging and recasting the male gaze in literature, rewrite and recreate the male-created text from the feminist perspective.

Feminist writers and critics have keenly felt the complete negation of the female experience in literature. Even the projection of the image of women has been compressed into a few acceptable roles. Women are usually cast into a few popular stereotypes of a narrow range of characterization. There are two basic types of image positive roles, which depict women as independent, intelligent and even heroic; and a
surplus of misogynistic roles commonly identified as the bitch, the witch, the vamp and the virgin/goddess.

Every human being is the product of many crosscutting, multi-layered identities. Gender defines a vital part of many crosscutting, multi-layered identity as a female, has other identities like a daughter, a sister, a college teacher, a writer, an Indian, a member of a particular religion or a resident of a particular neighborhood. Most identities are acquired or mutable. Few identities such as biological parentage, identities based on native land village or locale where a person is born and brought up are also fixed. Mostly, these identity layers are taken for granted by people and they find expression in their appropriate realms at different points of time. If any particular identity provides greater access to power, and opportunities, any group or person may assert that identity with greater vigour. If a person perceives a particular basic identity as threatened or suppressed, he or she assigns a high priority to that identity. It happens specially when the identity is essential to the person’s social, economic and personal well-being. For example when a north Indian travels to south India he becomes aware of his identity as a north Indian because most people there do not understand the language he speaks. Similarly a woman becomes conscious of her identity as a woman when she is discriminated against. Women face sexual harassment or discrimination in employment and this creates an enhanced and poignant awareness of
their identity as women. Otherwise, their gender identity is only one of their multiple overlapping and cross-cutting identities which co-exist peacefully. Today many women appear to be imprisoned in their gender identity because society imposes many disabilities upon them due to their gender. Often young girls who are not yet ready for marriage are forced into marriage and early motherhood. Many women cannot decide for themselves when and how many children to have. A woman who is denied control over her own body might begin to hate her identity as a woman because she cannot escape from her oppression. In the absence of pressures due to gender, womanhood can be a more enriching experience than manhood. Women show a great ideal of flexibility and adaptation to the numerous social contacts without inordinate strain. The identity of women is often challenged because of her sense of insecurity. In patriarchal societies, she is denied roots even in her parental family, which is the most primary identity-inculcating unit of society. For men, their parental identity and their roots to their place of birth and upbringing are immutable. For women these two immutable identities are sought to be systematically weakened, leading to a great deal of insecurity and sense of dependence on men.

In our peculiar family structure the erasure of the previous identity of a woman upon marriage destroys her sense of self. This insecurity creates negative consequences in her marital home. If she is an intellectually
adorned individual, marriage does not fulfill her and she feels emptiness. There is a feeling that one’s intellectual self is being suppressed. This dormant self becomes restive, wanting a release. The conflict between the female self and the intellectual self often bears self-expression. The problem of self-location, thus finds a solution in self-expression. A writer’s urge is to express what she thinks. She wants to express her real thoughts.

It was always a fact that women were written about and they had to accept the nature of their being through the vision of others. They get a new vision accompanying the awareness, but women need to add a voice to that vision if they desire their stories to be told. The dual confinement and the necessity to be free signify women’s writing. The most difficult thing for women to talk about and to write about is sex and their own sexual beings. They were not supposed to have sexuality, considered as purely passive participants in sex. On the contrary, sex is one of the most troubling parts of a woman’s life, too. Writing about it might have made the women writers nervous, but those who ventured boldly to write about sex, found that it had liberated them as women and writers. The process of writing yields them self-knowledge and strength.

The feminist impulse in literature thus becomes a broad based concern with the situation of women in the world. It explores the idea of
womanhood and the importance of what it means to be female in what has essentially been a male dominated society. ...The feminist movement has been partly responsible for women's increasing awareness regarding their status in society. In this transition from ignorance to awareness one may possible chart three distinct stages. The three stages are pre awareness, resentment and rebellion. In the first stage they obeyed and internalized the authoritarian laws. The questioning of male supremacy and the social custom comprised of the second stage. In the final stage, women protested against all forms of male oppression.

This is how Elaine Showalter divides the struggle for female liberation into corresponding stages – the feminine, the feminist and the female.

Marriage locates itself in romance, sexuality and social environment. Some women opt for marriages of their own choice and some accept arranges matches. The idea of romance is significant in both, raising the question whether romance begins after marriage when dreams are built together or whether the dreams of romance are culturally cultivated through myths of an ideal, undying love, or whether the idea of romance emanates from the idea of a self or the idea of the imaginary. Marriage is viewed not as self-fulfillment, but the fulfillment of a social and familial duty where the body is foregrounded as a commodity. Sexuality has its own role to play, be it an arranged marriage or love marriage. Love, acceptance, response, all come to rest on the point of sexual relationship,
and even the struggle between the claims of freedom and the claims of the body depend on this.

Jain Jasbir in “a husband is a sheltering free writes the struggle between the body and the mind continues on the social and personal levels, sometimes placing them at odds. The individual self, whether male or female, finds itself constrained by the need to keep up appearances, to continue with the idea of pretence, for surfaces tend to hide rather than express. Somewhere there is the feeling that love is the expression of an ego, which expects total acceptance. Social conventions and the traditional marriage in themselves provide the man with a more privileged position, which can hope for subjection and merger for the other; for the woman, the prescribed code is that of surrender and obedience. But between these socially defined role flutters the need to find fulfillment and expression.

Marriage is used by both parties with a sense of self-preservation, self-promotion, and self-realization. The meaning of marriage as a bond takes various shapes for each women-some women are protected by it, some create their own space within it, and some are irked by the dependence imposed by it. The reason, as judged by Jasbir Jain, is that “there are perhaps always, at least two selves in a woman, one that wants freedom, the other that wants to belong. One of the two has to yield.”

Marriage is a power game where each is trying to define the other’s
territory of freedom and choice. Individuals differ in their response to the claims of this relationship. Women feel hedged in by marriage and its contradictory claims, as so many doors are closed for them. It requires a great effort to surmount this, to move out of self-hatred and to realize the passions of the body, thwarted by the idea of the sexual passivity of the woman and we privileged position of the male. Marriage also necessitates a lot of pretension, the idea of romance creating the myth of merger, of a two in one person, of shared thoughts and desires, but the relationship itself is built upon social images and leads to secretes, pretenses and manipulations. The myth of a romantic union, explored along with the idea of power in marital relationships, leads us to the fact that fulfillment through sex and love gives the woman a sense of power and man may be afraid of being absorbed and contained as much as a women. The present study has analyzed the fiction of A. S. Byatt on the basis of their femaleness from the feminist perspective, the patriarchal hypothesis that women should live and express themselves within the bounds of their womanhood has been repudiated through their images of women and their efforts to outline new locations. The cultural disposition of woman is as multidimensional and multifarious as that of man.

This thesis is an investigation of the journeys toward a sense of identity or selfhood achieved through honest and accurate appreciation of the lives of others, made by several female characters in the fiction of A. S.
Byatt. I believe that because Byatt values literature as a serious business, that teaches as well as entertains, her writing can play a significant role in illuminating the lives of women by means of its portrayal of the resolution of women's struggles. Women's lives despite the rise of feminism, are still not equitable. While many women strive to attain a balance of independence and intimacy and connection within community, many do not succeed in this endeavour. The numerous challenges they face are difficult and confronting, and the stories of their efforts resemble journeys through a labyrinth or maze. Byatt acknowledges Iris Murdoch as her literary mother, frequently citing Murdoch's belief in the ability of literature to improve human life. While Byatt is interested in what characters learn about their relations to others and the world, she makes it clear that characters are constructs, not real people. Yet her fiction is an ongoing exploration of the nature of reality and the nature of selfhood, particularly that of women. According to feminist theorists, women are constrained than men and are therefore the focus of this study, but their experience of constraint is a more complex matter than experience of mere undifferentiated oppression, and is better represented by the structure of the labyrinth than that of the simple linear journey. All the characters in this study struggle to flee from restraint, seek purpose and agency in the world through interaction with others, and escape a feminized Plato's Cave by learning to see more accurately and all but one
emerge from the maze into an autonomous and independent existence in community with others.

Readers acquainted with A. S. Byatt’s Booker Prize winning novel ‘Possession’ will recognize that between the covers of a Byatt volume can be found a veritable library, if not also an art gallery, that can intimidate even the most prepared and best educated reader. Jane Campbell asserts that since the publication of Byatt’s first novel “The Shadow of the Sun” her fiction has focused on female artists and women as thinkers and searchers for wisdom. Byatt uses the term ‘heliotropic’ to describe the artistic imagination as the key signifier in her title because it best represents the cultural and linguistic challenges facing these women characters. Mythologized as sun gods being passively reflected in moon goddesses, the heliotropic imagination apparently belongs to men, but Campbell reveals the ways in which Byatt’s talented and intelligent women struggle internally as well as externally against such an accepted truth and assert their own right ‘to be the sun or nothing’. Tracing that struggle through Byatt’s fiction, in Possession, Byatt finally offers full-fledged female artistry in the heliotropic imaginations of Christabel and Blanche and that at last the creative sun is gendered female in the poems of both Ash and Christabel. However, while reversing the myth acknowledges female claims to creativity, it does not resolve either cultural or linguistic problems, as the costs to both Blanche and
Christabel attest Byatt’s heliotropic imagination has required a genderless sun and Campbell offers an description of the third stage feminist vision of a society in which the sexual signifier would be free to move as best describing Byatt’s own brand of feminism praising her open texts that, by eschewing dogmatism, deconstructing binaries of all kinds, and encouraging a plurality of readings, serve women well.

Byatt continually offers linguistic experiments, reflecting her ongoing thematic concern with ‘what language is’. Some texts draw on a dominant myth for symbols, metaphors, and allusions, as does ‘The Game’ [1967] which relates to the story of the Lady of Shalott while assuring us that it does not function alone and it does not become a straightforward parallel to the action. Separating appreciation of myths from belief in them from beliefs in them allows Byatt to create her own tales more effectively. Byatt constructs a female mythology in the experimental metaphorical structure of ‘The Virgin In The Garden’ contrasting birth and Renaissance with male mythology of Dying God and Resurrection. Conversely, it’s a plain demythologized style, bare of metaphor. Byatt’s publication of Babel Tower in 1996 and A Whistling Woman in 2002, is able to give the most complete analysis that chronicle British history from the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953 to 1970. But the temporal structure includes more than those seventeen years as the coronation is paralleled in one of Byatt’s ‘enclosed space’ narratives by a
play depicting Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen in The Virgin In The Garden, which also opens with a prologue dated 1980. Byatt discusses in fascinating detail the lives of the Potter family and their friends – particularly of Frederica, Daniel and Alexander – which are captured in the fluidity of real experience. Neither time nor place contains them. Frederica for instance, “who had felt old at thirty was surprised at how she did not feel old at sixty” [A Whistling Woman : 49] Byatt’s incorporation of the visual arts, her creation of fairy stories and her focus on elementals deserve and receive particular attention.

In all of the six novels, most of the characters are closely connected to the literary world through their work and passion for books and reading. The characters’ discussions and thoughts frequently center on books and authors, allowing for numerous intertextual references. Indeed, literature provides characters such as Frederica, Stephanie and Alexander with lens for creating and interpreting themselves and the people around them. The novels thematize reading activities and the reader’s response by mirroring the characters reading or looking at other people reading – reading texts by both real life authors and the characters themselves. In all of the novels, the reader can sense the intellectual, emotional and physical need, the hunger, and passion the characters feel for thinking and talking in abstract terms, about literature, imaginary characters and ideas. Byatt’s characters, for whom reading is a love, need, and art, show that deep
thinking and concentrated, careful reading are powerful and immediate actions and can function as vital sources of knowledge and experience. The novels tackle the metafictional preoccupation with the real and the imaginary and the possible blurring of the two in providing comments on how the characters see literary characters, events and thoughts encountered in books, and their influence on the characters’ own life. In most of the novel, the characters often compare the people around them—in essence other fictional characters to the imaginary characters they have met in books that exist also in Byatt’s readers’ reality. Byatt’s characters also feel that they themselves can be uncomfortably close to other, real life literary characters. This shows the reader how Byatt’s imaginary characters can take on a role of another imaginary character who is paradoxically, real in that he or she exists in the readers real life. Byatt additionally examines the blurred line between real and the imaginary by demonstrating how her characters and real-life literary characters or roles can become unseparable and shows how her characters feel that they have lived through and in some authors fiction.

Real-life imaginary characters and books have an immediate impact on Byatt’s characters’ lives, as the characters discover that several important decisions in their lives stem from literary works. Noticeably, the characters’ imaginations abound in images from literature in their relationship with the opposite sex, which makes them see the real people
of their lives through imaginary relish, even to the extent that they are unable to stop thinking in literary terms even when making love. Byatt’s characters find it amazing how ‘real’ the imaginary personages seem, even more real, better understood and more easily interpreted than the real people of their lives. Byatt further complicates the line between fact and fiction by introducing real-life personages as characters into her fiction as well as by placing the works by her own characters next to the ones by real-life authors. Byatt’s characters venture to claim that they sometimes feel that real-life authors are like literary characters for them, as authors are similarly made of words and are not necessarily reachable, ‘touchable’ in their real life. The borders between fiction and reality become even more blurred when the characters realize that the fiction they have been writing is their own real life, leading to the thought that fiction can seem more real than reality itself.

The story telling sessions provide insights into how the characters and by extension, the real-life reader, can become engrossed by the text and imagine and live in another world. Moreover, the characters believe in the healing power of stories and also suggest that the reader can learn about other people and life in general from stories and fairy tales, even though these are fictional. Additionally, Byatt points to the idea that it is universal to perceive one’s life as a story with beginnings, middles and ends. The characters think about and discuss word meanings,
etymologies, associations and connotations, drawing the reader’s attention to the idea that language has a performative power by making certain phenomena happen through the very act of altering words. The characters with heavily word-based thinking are contrasted with those who lack words and are unable to manipulate and master language. In The Virgin In The Garden the characters attempt to love in language, to love via the meter, rhythm and rhyme of poetry. Byatt takes an especially closed look at different aspects of language in Babel Tower in which she discusses the teaching of language, the gap between private and public language, and the power of language to create, captivate, alter and distort reality.

The novels include a number of characters who write books, plays, poems and book reviews. The characters talk about the construction of their own works, the images used and the authors who have influenced their writing styles. The characters also talk about the works of Byatt’s other characters, most apparent in the discussions revolving around Jude’s polemical Babble tower. The processes of writing are most closely observed in connection with the central character Frederica. Babbel Tower mirrors Frederica in acts of writing by showing how she creates different texts such as book reviews, reports and diary notes. Frederica discusses her voice as a writer, the reality or irreality of it, thinking whether the use of ‘I’ makes her seem less real to herself. She discovers
that it is hard, perhaps impossible to write without fictionalizing oneself and one’s life. Frederica’s reviews, reports, and notes become part of her Laminations, a book of cut-ups, quotations and fragments. Babel tower contains both, material by other novelists, poets and playwrights as well as Byatt’s own texts imitating different genres. The novel thus underscores the fragmentation of texts and the everyday textuality of the surrounding world as well as emphasizes the myriad of different textual types and genres that can be included in the contemporary novel.

With The Biographers Tale, A. S. Byatt embarks the reader on a wild ride part sleuth tale, part academic parody, part Victorian Chronicle. The constant back-and-forth, proceeds flawlessly and the story is devoid of plot twists, which infuse energy into the narrative. Byatt’s prose is powerful and poetic and sentences reverberate like great music. Byatt keeps her readers on their intellectual toes with historical literary, philosophical, scientific and historical references on virtually every page. Nanson is an unlikely hero, but the perfect protagonist-narrator for Byatt’s comic tale. His research evolves by intricately layered turns and drips with equal measures of learning and wit and is a satire on the ways that high theory deadens literary practice, and how competing notions about what constitutes a legitimate ‘biography’.

Byatt’s novels also appear to encourage a realistic reading. This is manifested in the ways books have a distinctly recognizable social and
cultural setting, picturing the characters' lives unfolding against the background of the new Elizabethan Age of the 1950s the emergence of counter-culture, ideal communities, and anti-universities as well as the new language and the new forms of knowledge found in television and multimedia. The novels thus have a distinct sense of time and place, recording the history development of the British society and culture and setting it in a wider cultural context. The Virgin In The Garden appears on the surface as more overtly realist texts, it employs self-reflexive characteristics examining the process of writing, reading and constructing the real and the imaginary. Babel Tower strikes as a more overtly experimental text due to the way it manifests structural incoherence and the inclusion of multiple hypodiegetic levels different texts and discourse. All in all it can be claimed that Byatt's achievements in the hybrid mode that has been described as 'experimental realism' and 'Post-modern realism' by literary scholars and 'self-conscious realism' by herself, stem from her deft employment of metafictional devices while drawing on a narrative tradition with a strong realist dominant. One can thus see Byatt's novels as a particularly good example of a post modern British novel's position oat the crossroads, examining both paths of the realist and the more self reflexive writing practices. Byatt's work thus gives valuable insights into the ways the writer can challenge, extend, reshapes, or combine both realist and more inward-looking modes feminist
expression by examining realism self-consciously or self-consciousness realistically.

Feminist literary criticism has given us an opportunity to look at 'women' in literature from women's point of view. This reminds me of John Stuart Mill's observation:

“We may safely assert that the knowledge that men can acquire of women, even as they have been and are, without reference to what they might be, is wretchedly imperfect and superficial and will always be so until women themselves have told all they have to tell.”