Chapter VI

CONCLUSION

The above study of the Indian English novels from 1930 till 1980 on the basis of the feminist concept has shown us how in the Indian society, women, from a very low position and helpless state has been gradually rising in their position and becoming stronger in their status in their effort to earn an equal position with man.

The writers who wrote before 1930, were mostly pre-occupied, it is true, with social, historical or political fiction, reflecting the tradition of the society, past and present, manners and custom, their political condition and their religious beliefs. Very few novels were written on the status of women in society or even their plight in the society as if their sad plight was no cause of concern for the society in general. But even then a few writers did show, as we have seen from our study, the cruel practice and heinous crimes they were subjected to in the name of religion and social customs. For, women had no identity of their own except that of somebody's daughter, wife and mother. She made her life worthwhile only through her services to her husband and children. She was married off at a very young age and was burdened with children and household duties. No need for her education was felt. She was not educated enough to reason out
her cause of unhappiness or to find a solution to her problems. She lacked the courage to overstep the limits set down for her by society and religion; so they continued suffering, as we see in Cornelia Sorabji's novel, Shabala : A Child Mother (1920). A woman was a slave to her husband's every need, so much so that after the husband's death, she was expected to end her life too in his funeral pyre, as Clavirunda was, in A. Madhaviah's Clarinda (1915). Sati and child-marriages were common practices till the turn of the century and even after it.

In the novels written between 1931 and 1950, we find that the picture of oppression and suppression of women and their silent and helpless suffering continues from the earlier period at least till the end of the thirties. The novels written as early as 1933 like Uramee Bahadur's The Unveiled Court and Tears of Sorrow, show this. Women are shown to have no escape from torture and oppression in society. Widows are not encouraged to remarry, and if they do, the relationship is doomed from the beginning, as Nasira's case in Tears of Sorrow (1933) shows; Savitri in R.K. Narayan's The Dark Room (1938), and even Humira in Iqbalunnes Hussain's Purdah and Polygamy (1934) are the same helpless victim of male dominance.

In 'The Dark Room' (1938), we find that although the woman victim, Savitri, does protest against her suppression, and walks out of her house, she has to come back to her husband at the end and live on his terms only. Being uneducated, docile
and tradition-bound, she is unable to break away from her family. She finds that even society does not accept a woman who is not under the protection of a man, be it husband, father or son. Gauri, however, in *The Old Woman and the Cow* (1960), has the courage to walk out from her husband's home, because, though uneducated, she has an alternative - she can work for her livelihood in a private Nursing Home.

The novels of this period also show that in a traditional and patriarchal society, discrimination against women begins at her birth itself; a son is regarded as a priceless asset and a girl, a born liability right from their birth. There is a traditional demand for purity in women and they are tamed by men and society to be docile as Gauri is expected to be in *The Old Woman and the Cow* (1960). This vulnerability of women is not just from feminine weakness but also from their lack of education and consequent want of economic independence, as we find in novels like Mulk Raj Anand's *Morning Face*, which, though published in 1969, deals with the period before Independence. Here too, we see Devaki, the widow, who is not only prevented from remarrying, but is also denied the simple pleasures of wearing jewellery or eating pan in the name of religion. Even though her husband is dead, she is controlled by the other male members of her husband's family.
The novels of this period also show that the authoritarian husband or father exploits and curbs the individual freedom of women as we see it in Iqbalunnisa's *Purdah and Polygamy* (1944). Here she exposes the terrible condition of Muslim women behind the *purdah*. Far from protecting women from harm, marriage often makes them more vulnerable to and insecure from male violence - from their own husband! They are forced to accept polygamy.

And yet against this gloomy picture till Independence, we find a gradual change taking place simultaneously. Women have started taking active part in social and national causes like joining in the freedom movement like Rajeswari Bai in Venkataramani's *Kandan the Patriot* (1932) and that old woman in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938). The nationalist movement played a vital part in bringing the women out of their homes for the first time. It not only gave them confidence to fight for their country's freedom but also to fight for their own cause. It was no doubt an effect of Gandhi's concern for women and his call to them in this period.

Besides this, during this period, many favourable changes took place in society. Women were granted the right to vote, a little before this period that is in 1926. The formation of the All India Women's Conference in 1927 laid stress on women's education, and fought against social injustice. They tried to improve women's position in society.
The Sarda Act of 1929 prohibited child-marriages and the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 provided a share in property.

And yet we find in the novels of this period that some of the women characters conform to the traditional values and live up to the ideal of the eternal feminine of the traditional society, like Devaki and Draupadi in Morning Face (1968), Munira in Purdah and Polyamory (1944) and Anjum in Inquilab (1955). They are conscious of being exploited; but because they cannot escape, they conform. They are not able to protest or rebel outwardly against a situation unpleasant to them, so they meekly accept it. Mohini, too, in Bhabani Bhattacharya's Music for Mohini (1952) meekly accepts the authority of her husband's home and its traditional customs. In the male dominated Indian society of the thirties and forties, it is, therefore, found to be difficult for a woman to assert herself because she is always, directly or indirectly pressurized not to overstep the limits prescribed for her by religion and society.

However, we also see in this same period, a few women characters who refuse to be exploited physically as Gauri in Anand's The Old Woman and the Cow (1960) and economically as Rosie in R.K. Narayan's The Guide (1958). Both can protest because they are able to live independent of their husbands. Gauri, inspite of her lack of education, works as
a nurse in Dr. Mahindre's Nursing Home. And Rosie, of course, is a famous dancer who lives an independent life without any support from either Raju or her husband Marco. It is however, significant that these novels came out after 1950, though their authors started writing two decades ago. It is also we see gradually, women beginning to throw aside the mantle of the traditional role that society and religion thrust upon them, and struggling to achieve an identity of their own. We may point here to Ishwani in The Brocaded Sari (1946) and to Daisy in R.K. Narayan's The Painter of Signs (1976). These novels show the women being led through the normal incidents of domestic life to a point where circumstances compel them to strike out into a more radical course of action or thought. Unlike Nazni or Munira in Purdah and Polygamy (1944) who are unable to walk out of the oppressive environment because of lack of education and financial dependence on their husbands. Ishwani in The Brocaded Sari (1946) manages to overcome this because of her education and her improved social condition and the environment she grew up in.

This change in the women, of being able to assess her position within the family and in society is more obvious in novels written after the fifties, such as Daisy in The Painter of Signs (1976) and Rosie in The Guide (1956). Both are unconventional in that they provoke a clash with accepted social convention. Both lead a sexually uninhibited
life with the men of their choice, without the sanctity of marriage. They are the Indian New Women: they rebel against personal circumstances. Their struggle and conflict is within and without. They have to make a choice between the self and society. We find this in Laila too, in Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) where individual preference is given more importance. Here, the old traditional society comes into conflict with the new society and the new values. Laila tries to choose her responsibility, her rights, in the Indian framework.

Daisy in *The Guide* (1958) questions the obligation of women to produce children. She openly suggests that motherhood need not be in the only or even the most desirable route of female fulfilment. "I want something more than my husband and my children and my home", is the persistent voice of the women that can no longer be ignored, the voice of the New Women! It is even the voice of the radical feminists.

Against the above type of women created by the novelist before 1950, we come across novels like S.Y. Krishnaswamy's *Kalyani's Husband* (1957) and Jatindra M. Ganguly's *Two Mothers* (1964). We find here women who are not allowed to forget their marriage vows or strive for further dimensions in their lives - the demands of convention and society must be sustained. Thus the women here keep away from the luxury of self-analysis. So it is not that the
woman's position from the fifties has changed completely.
There are some who are unable to break free from the tradi-
tional values; or there are still novelists who want the
women to live under traditional restraints.

However, the unquestioning acceptance of woman's fate
was gradually crumbling. Woman wanted more choice and control
over their lives. In novels like Rayantara Sahgal's The Day
in Shadow (1971) and Jai Nimbkar's Temporary Ameare (1974),
we find the women characters Simrit and Vinita analysing
their feelings and their personal thoughts. They are no longer
willing to accept marriage as final. Earlier, women who found
themselves miserable in their marriage, had no second chance.
But now, a woman like Simrit is willing to walk out of an
unhappy marriage and start a new life all over again with the
option to remarry open before her. Widows earlier led a
miserable and dehumanising life because of lack of education;
they felt apologetic for their very existence, like Suhra in
Purshna and Polytlement (1944).

However, with the various schemes of educating women
and the many laws formulated for their protection, the econo-
mical status of women improved considerably. With the passing
of the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act 1971 which gave
women the choice of motherhood, women found for themselves a
more comfortable place in society. Women could now lead

In Anita Desai's novels, we meet intellectually advanced women in the modern Indian society, where greater emphasis is laid on the man-woman relationship. The women characters all desire personal liberty and equality in status on which is based emotional and mental security. Desai does not portray women who merely crave for material and economical right. They want to be understood and accepted on their own terms as Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) and Monisha in *Voice in the City* (1965). They demand respect as individuals.

Thus, after analysing the novels where women characters and their problems are prominent, especially from 1930 onwards, it is evident that there has certainly been some changes, progress and achievements in the position of women. In the novels written after 1950, some of the women characters may conform to the traditional role, but most of them refuse to accept the age-old traditional values. They rebel against oppression. This is because of their improved social status, their education and their financial independence. Women are no longer forced to honour the vows of matrimony if they are unhappy with their husbands. For no woman contemplates divorce, unless compelled to do so out of a basic desire to live as a person in her own right, to live without fear and oppression.
But in a vast country like India with her diverse culture and religion, social customs dictate the lives of millions in towns and villages. That is why even as many women strive for personal liberty and emotional security, we witness gruesome incidents like dowry deaths, sati, child-marriages, amniocentesis and sexual violation. All this even as we enter the twenty-first century! These are a grim reminder that even today - in an age when the modern world has progressed so much, Indian women still suffer from male indifference and inhumanity. Fortunately, at the same time, as we have already noted, there have also been women, educated and economically independent who can think of their individual freedom and individual right. Such women, whom we have seen in many novels, are still small in number of course. After all this identity crisis in men and women cannot be solved by one generation or the next; as Betty Friedan says in her *Feminine Mystique*,

... in our rapidly changing society, it must be faced continually, solved only to be faced again in the span of a single lifetime. A life plan must be open to change, as new possibilities open, in society and oneself.

(p. 363)
And this is what the Indian English novels written over the ages show. However, we have to remember that until women assume her due place in society, human progress is bound to advance but slowly.