Chapter III

THE NOVELISTS TILL 1930

The novels that appeared during this early period were generally concerned with their political and historical aspect of Indian life or with the customs, traditions and diverse culture of the Indian people. The woman question was not conspicuous during this period. Nevertheless it is interesting to find many novels where women play prominent roles, thereby reflecting their problems and their position in their homes and the society. In order to have a glimpse of the position and problems of the Indian woman before 1930, I will discuss here a few select novels that appeared before 1930.

Since the novelists' object is to observe man in his day to day realities, the manner and custom by which man defines his own identity is also of importance for the novelist. No matter in which language a novel is written, an Indian novelist is directly involved in the social values and experiences prevalent in the Indian context.

During the British rule, Bengal was the region which first showed the impact of the western civilisation through British rule. Naturally it was the writers of this region like Kylash Chunder Dutt, Sochee Chunder Dutt and Lal
Behari Day who first came to write fiction in English.

The earliest work of fiction in Indian literature is Kylash Chunder Dutt's *A Journal of Forty-eight Hours of the Year 1945*, published in 1835. It depicts the violent uprising of the English-educated Indian society against the British rule. This political novel does not however, show the lot of women in the society of the time.

Sochee Chunder Dutt's *The Young Seminder* which appeared in 1885 reveals the social customs, traditions and religious beliefs of that period; this too, does not raise any woman question.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Raimohun's Wife* was first published in a periodical in 1864 and Toru Dutt's *Biance* in 1878, but since these two novels also do not show any serious social purpose - though they portray some women character, they have been excluded from our discussion.

Next, we must mention Lal Behari Day's *Govinda Samanta*, published in 1874. The story of the novel is about a Bengal peasant family and narrates their suffering. It is about the oppression and humiliation the poor peasants are subjected to by the landowners. There is a similar sub-story to this where a British indigo-planter takes advantage of his poor and helpless workers. Set against a rural background,
one can detect faint undertones of resentment against this foreign oppression. It also illustrates the rural life of Bengal, their manners and customs. It describes in minute detail their culture, tradition and their religious beliefs. Amidst all these, we see here the high position of an aged woman as the mother in an Indian family. But here, too, as in the other earlier novels, no woman question is raised.

The first Indo-Anglian social novel depicting women's lot is *The Star of Sikri* (1893) by K. K. Sinha. This novel reveals the situation of girls forced into marriage by their parents at a very young age, as the story of this novel shows us. Rajini Kumari, an eleven year old girl is forced to marry Kishen, chosen by her father. But Rajini rebels against her father and refuses to accept Kishen as her husband. The author's effort to show the girl independent-minded and defiant is, however, not very convincing. And even more unbelievable is Rajini's love for a man she has seen only in her dreams. But even such an unconvincing story shows that some writers of that early period were conscious of the state of women in society. Such writings were, however, not taken very seriously then as the ideas portrayed in theme clashed with the accepted social norms; the tradition and beliefs being too deeply embedded in the society of the time. Nevertheless, the author's intention is to show the plight of helpless young
girls who are forced to marry at a very young age, as is evident from his comment in chapter III of the novel.

Hundreds, nay thousands of cases can be cited in which the feelings of daughters are crushed under the iron hand of tyranny - tyranny of their custom - resulting in the long run in the misery of the daughters, and along with them, of their parents. The girl is yoked to a rich man, without any consideration of her feelings towards him. It is deplorable indeed that parents do not know that they overstep the bounds of parental authority to abuse the power with which they have been invested when they marry their grown up children against their wishes.¹

K.K. Sinha's second novel Sanjogita (1903) is a historical novel based on the familiar story of Sanjogita, and rivalry between her father, King Jay Chand Rathore and Prithvi Raj Chauhan. The story is important for us here because one gets an idea of the past tradition in the royal Indian families - of holding a Swayamvara for the princesses when choosing a husband for them. This shows the individual choice and freedom they enjoyed in the selection of their
life-partners. This practice, however, disappeared in time.

Next, we have Krupabai Satthianandhan's *Kamala: A Story of Hindu Life* (1894) and *Sonu: A Story of Native Christian Life* (1895). Both the novels are autobiographical, they being the reflections of the author's own life. The former reveals the writer's early life and the latter depicts the life of her sorrows caused by the author's long illness and her only son's death. Through these two novels, we can have a glimpse of the life of Indian women in the late nineteenth century, though no specific woman question is raised through the stories.

Shevantibai Nihalbe's *Ratnabai* was written in 1895 and is about prejudices against women's education. The story is about Ratnabai, a Maratha Brahmin girl married at the age of nine years. When her husband goes to England for higher studies, Ratnabai too is sent to school by her father, much against the wishes of her in-laws. And when her husband returns home, he is surprised and happy to find an educated wife waiting for him. Shevantibai shows thus the importance of education for girls in this novel, at a time when girls were not generally sent to any educational institution.

Cornelia Sorabji, of a Parsi-Christian background, was the author of a number of stories and one of the first
few Indian English writers who tried to penetrate the purdah in the highly orthodox and conservative households and reveal the life behind. The situations she depicts to show women and children in them are sad and full of despair, especially those of the child widows when the evil customs and taboos restrict their life. She reveals for the first time the predicament of women in a completely male-dominated society, where, the only life they knew was within the four walls of their well-guarded court. Sorabji's disapproval of the conditions of women, even as early as 1904, spoke louder than actions. Leaving aside her collection of stories like Love and Life Behind the Purdah (1901), Sun Babies: Studies in the Child-Life of India (1904) and Between the Twilight (1908), which are outside our chosen scope, we go to her only novelette, Shubala: A Child-Mother (1920). Very small in size, but very important for our purpose, Sorabji writes here about a ten year old girl, Shubala, married to the nephew of a Maharaja. When Shubala is expecting her first child, she comes to her parents' home for the delivery. But her in-laws refuse to allow any doctors to attend her during childbirth, and insists she have the baby in the traditional way at home attended by the uneducated, untrained female members of the family. The baby is born in a very unhygienic condition, and Shubala herself suffers a lot because of lack of proper medical care and also of her tender age. Sorabji
makes a plea to take initiative in preventing such heinous acts. For, such incidents are not isolated but are common occurrences all over our country. She wants society to fight against such injustice, to raise their voice against such attitude and help bringing about a change for the improvement of women in society. This short novel thus focuses its attention directly on the sad plight of the Indian women at home.

A. Madhaviah's novel Clarinda (1915) which is subtitled A Historical Novel, is more of a social novel than historical, for it reveals the vices and evils prevalent in the Hindu society. The story is about Clavirunda Bai, a young Maratha Brahmin woman. Clavirunda, as a tender aged girl is married off to a rich, middle-aged widower with a grown-up son, who also makes advances to her. Her husband suspects her for this. And when he dies, the people attempt to burn her a sati. However, she is rescued by an English officer who had earlier saved her from a snake-bite. They fall in love and begin to live together as husband and wife. Clavirunda becomes disillusioned with the cruel practices and customs of the Hindu society and decides to become a Christian. Clavirunda is eventually converted to Christianity and takes the Christian name Clarinda.
In this novel, the writers reveals thus the pitiable position of women in the Hindu society. Child marriages and sati that were very much prevalent at the time and the way the young girls were married off to men twice their age, get well-reflected here. A. Madhaviah points out through this story the need for reforming society, where women are subjected to such heinous crimes.

Writing about the woman in the Indian English novels before 1930, special mention must be made of Y.S. Venkataramani who came into prominence with his Murugan the Tiller in 1927. The role of woman or her position in the society does not, however, get reflected in this first novel of his. The setting here is the village, and story centres round the simple village life where there is subtle satire of urban life. There is an unmistakable streak of the Gandhian ideal of rural reconstruction of India evident throughout the novel. But his second novel, Kandan the Patriot published in 1932 shows the role of woman in the society. Inspired by the Gandhian nationalist upheaval of 1930-31, the novel reflects the national movement for political freedom and the women's role there during Gandhi's leadership. The story is about Kandan, an ICS Officer and his love and sympathy for his countrymen. While in Oxford, he meets and falls in love with a rich Marathi girl, Rajeswari Bai. They decide to marry in India. But once they return, Rajeswari joins the
National movement, embracing the greater nationalist cause and keeping in abeyance her individual wishes and ambitions. She refuses now to go ahead with their marriage plans until Kandan gives up his job as an ICS officer under the foreign rulers and join the nationalist political struggle. It is only towards the end of the story that Kandan resigns from his job and joins in the freedom struggle.

Thus we see here the women taking equal part in the nationalist movement under the leadership of Gandhi.

In this way, it is evident that there were at least a few novels written during this period that dealt with the sad plight of women in the society. No doubt, the novelists till 1930 were generally concerned with the depiction of Indian life and society, manners and customs, reconstruction of Indian History, and reflection of the Indian Political situation, leaving aside the plight of women in the society. But there were still a few novelists from the last decade of the nineteenth century onwards who were preoccupied not only with the political upheaval that was taking place, or the society in general, but had also showed the need for a change in the social ideals and outlook.

The man-woman relationship which was the main theme in the European novels, proved to be an obstacle to the Indian writers in the late nineteenth century. Because in
India, the conventions of marriage was very restrictive - as Meenakshi Mukherjee shows it so well. Intermingling between the sexes was not allowed then, and girls were married off before puberty by their parents and elders. And the girls had no say in the matter of marriage. Marriage was more a social institution than an act of individual choice. Romantic love was considered illicit and was usually indulged in with a courtesan or a widow - such love was without any legal or social sanction. As both the widow and the courtesan were outside the structured society, a love of this kind in the novels was doomed from the very beginning. Instead, Indian novelists, like their European counterparts, started adopting social realism as a dominant feature in their novels, which was more intensified when the characters represented were women.

From this brief study of the few novels with women as important characters in them, and written before 1930, it is evident that only a handful of writers were aware of the status of women even at that early period. These writers were pained to note that women's position in society was not a social concern in those days. Women by themselves were too powerless and ill-equipped to protest against the society. Ignorant and weak, they accepted the position society and religion gave them.
However, writers like K.K. Sinha, Shantibai Nikambe, A. Madhaviah and Cornelia Sorabji did try to bring about a change in women's position by encouraging education among them, urging the society to create a congenial atmosphere for them where they could live like proper human beings, and where they will not have to die cruel deaths as sub-human beings. Even before 1930, there was, therefore, an atmosphere in Indian English literature to think and write about the plight of women, and the need for improving their situation at home and position in society.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


2. Ibid., p. 98

3. Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1985, p. 70