Chapter 5

IRREPRESSIBLE FEMALE SPIRIT

While chronicling the indomitable female spirit, in the earlier chapters, this researcher has charted the evolution of feminism from its embryonic stages. If woman's oppression is a fact of human existence, so is her resentment at the raw deal by a male dominated social order. The irrepressible female spirit resists, even if unsuccessfully, the strangle-hold of convention. However, the manifestations of this resentment — overt and covert — have varied according to the quality of the individual spirit, the time-spirit and the prevailing ethos. Woman's place with regard to 'hearth and horizon' has been hotly debated by individuals as also by conflicting ideologies. The zealous guardians of andocentric culture and right wing reactionaries have deliberately glorified woman as a house maker thereby confining her within the four walls. It is not a coincidence that the English novel abounds with 'Pamela's daughters', whereas demons are let loose on a rare Moll Flanders.

The novels of Fanny Burney, Jane Austen and George Eliot have paved the way for feminism by evoking the image of the trapped female psyche battling against regressive mental, emotional, cultural, social, political and economic patterns. Belief in sex equality is expressed as opposition to sex
hierarchy. Their novels reinforce the perception that woman's status vis-a-vis man is not ordained by God. Rather it has been determined and conditioned by patriarchy and is therefore open to fresh determination as the social order revolves. Anticipations of feminism are incipient in the thwarted aspirations, resultant frustrations and ambivalent compromises of Evelina, Cecilia, Camilla, Juliet, Elinor, Marianne, Fanny, Anne, Maggie, Dorothea, Rosamond, Gwendolen and Romola. Fanny Burney, Jane Austen and even George Eliot cannot be visualized as 'slogan-mongering' on the feminist bandwagon. Nevertheless, in varying degrees, they certainly blazed a new trail and ploughed their individual furrows in accepted critical and social opinion, by questioning the orthodox beliefs circumscribing women's traditional subordination. Though none of them can be regarded as a full-blown feminist, according to modern standards, for reasons already spelt out in the earlier chapters, they were avant-garde in the context of their times.

Fanny Burney, Jane Austen and George Eliot challenged the bogey of male supremacy by exposing the unfair nexus of name, inheritance, marriage, morals, education, culture and even religion, pitted against women. Women's oppression, sanctified in tradition, has percolated the female psyche. Consequently, women characters have often been portrayed juxtaposing their own contradictions and ambitions. The seminal importance of these three authors lies in their challenging of hierarchy, based on obscurantism, and in their realistic vision underscoring the linking of women's amelioration with education, work and economic issues. The works of these writers are a paean to the irrepressible
female spirit refusing to buckle under sexual politics and 'gendronomics'.

Resentment against systematic subjugation of women permeates the novels of Fanny Burney, Jane Austen and George Eliot with slight variation in the *modus operandi* because of the different timescapes.

The novels of Fanny Burney are the products of a social milieu, vastly different not only from the present one, but also from those of Jane Austen and George Eliot, when women had no voice of their own and the concept of female emancipation was non-existent. Naturally, Fanny Burney's feminism is a different kettle of fish from that of the later writers. Like a trickle which becomes a mighty torrent, Fanny Burney's exploratory endeavours were the tentative probings into feminism as envisioned today. Fanny Burney rightfully deserves to be lauded by feminists for emphasizing the role of education and economic independence as a prelude to an individual identity.

Fanny Burney is a pioneer in exposing the mad bad world from the perspective of an adolescent on the threshold of adulthood. It is a measure of Fanny Burney's maturity that she does not use *Evelina* to underscore the anti-thesis of the pastoral idyll and dissembling urbanity. Rather she unravels the reality of country and city life. Even though, Rousseau's influence is evident in the juxtaposition of ingenuous Evelina with disingenuous forms of polite society, Fanny Burney does not push this opposition too far. The novel *Evelina*, a treatise on survival and identity, challenges the regressive ideology of lover-mentor convention. Evelina's malleable, submissive, angelic feminine exterior cloaks an incisive and decisive core. But this takes its toll and the city sophistication and
sophistry soon overpower the ebullient ways of Evelina. She recognizes men as they are; powerful, fearsome, and menacing. However, this ambivalence is not deliberate, nor can Evelina be characterised as devious. This trapezing between conformism and self-assertion is part of the evolution of the undaunted female spirit as stated earlier. With the publication of *Evelina*, novel writing became a respectable metier for women. Women, for the first time, were talking of women as individuals and not as appendages to men, thereby anticipating feminism in their work.

Absence of lineage and family name generates identity crisis in Evelina and the stress on it reduces Cecilia to a yokel. Cecilia is more self-assured, rational, well-educated and economically independent. The novel is remarkable for Fanny Burney's realistic vision which was adroitly emulated and developed by Jane Austen in *Pride and Prejudice*. Fanny Burney in *Cecilia* confronts us with the dire consequences of radical departures from convention. The novel is beset with monetary issues, women's inheritance and the laws loaded against them. Richardson in *Clarissa* had exposed the bias against women in these laws. Family name seems to have a magical connotation to the males in the novel skilfully manipulated by Mrs Delvile to prejudice her son against Cecilia. Thus, Fanny Burney presages feminism by foregrounding economic issues. Though it is money that makes any relationship tick, yet economic independence cannot guarantee emancipation for women. Inheritance for woman can be as oppressive as dispossession in the absence of control over her feelings and finances. Cecilia's, tragic flaw is lack of perspicacity, her failure to see through her
fraudulent male patrons who are out to traduce her as their prized possession. There are streaks of feminism in the complex issues raised by Fanny Burney in Cecilia. Evelina is fortunate in having the sagacious and affectionate Mr Villars as her guardian and Lord Orville as her archangel and protector. Unlike her, Cecilia's three guardians, far from protecting her, betray her. However, Cecilia does not lose her nerve nor does she need smelling salts at a time of crisis. Educated, thoughtful and sensitive Cecilia is a precursor of active, rational, assertive and spirited heroines of Frances Brook, Charlotte Smith, Elizabeth Inchbald and Jane Austen. She portrays the pitiable plight of the girl child in Belfield family and the Hill household by challenging the orthodox belief of considering son's education as the best investment and insurance for the family.

By the time Fanny Burney wrote *Camilla*, she was quite clear about the importance of 'gendronomics'. The proceeds of the novel enabled Fanny Burney to buy a house for her family. In all her novels, Fanny Burney rues woman's total ignorance of commercial and legal niceties. Her novels are not romantic tales, but confront the real issues of life. Camilla, starting as a novice on worldly matters has to learn this the hard way. As this researcher has attempted to highlight, Fanny Burney was a pioneer in her emphasis on the pragmatic aspects of education in life. Much before Betty Friedan exploded the 'feminine mystique', Fanny Burney had exposed the fallacy of stereotypes by showing that her female characters are far more efficient and pragmatic than the supposedly sensible males.

True to her realistic vision, Fanny Burney visualises marriage as an economic necessity and deems it emblematic of money and personal identity. Ideal
relationship eludes most of the characters; marriage fails to meet the aspirations of women. Fanny Burney's last novel *The Wanderer* marks a paradigmatic shift in her attitude towards marriage. Juliet's defiant gesture of throwing her wedding ring into the dark deeps is a desperate bid to liberate herself from the nuptial noose. Fanny Burney challenges the irrevocability and sanctity of the marital bond, thereby undermining the entire ambit of social, cultural and religious mores.

Inspired by Romanticism and the French Revolution, the novel articulates Fanny Burney's disdain for tyranny *per se*, transcending the barriers of sex, class and nation. Anticipating modern feminism, Fanny Burney made love and not coercive barren rituals as the sound base for marriage. Juliet explores further the 'gendronomics' of survival undergone by Cecilia and Camilla. She is a female Robinson Crusoe striving for her subsistence. Elinor, a caricature of Mary Wollstonecraft, embodies the frustrations of an imperious and arrogant feminist who time and again tries to commit suicide because of her failure to force Harleigh to love her. The novel is an emblem of a young women's fight against tyranny of an unprincipled man who has blackmailed her into matrimony. The ending endorses Fanny Burney's juxtaposition of convention and radicalism to mitigate female difficulties and to liberate the female psyche from the trammels of male domination as Juliet is prepared to bear with obloquy and tribulations rather than stoically put up with an obnoxious husband. In deference to the constraints of her times, Fanny Burney cloaks this rebellious spirit behind a feminine facade. Instead of being berated for her conservatism, Burney should be lauded for pioneering pragmatically woman's economic independence and self-respect.
Jane Austen, in her novels, continues the battle against the compulsions of conservatism, conformism and collective consciousness. She furthers woman's cause by taking the veil off the fiery female spirit. Her novels are imbued with an ambience of space where women are free to move about without the fear of predatory villains. Subterfuge, which is present in Fanny Burney as a way of coping with the double standards of society is supplanted by forthrightness in Jane Austen's novels. Evelina, Cecilia, Camilla and Juliet seem quite weak and diffident as compared to self-assured, forthright, and robust Elizabeth Bennet and Anne Elliot. Passivity and lassitude are unknown to the Jane Austen heroine. In this respect, therefore, Jane Austen is a precursor of Betty Friedan in exploding the 'feminine mystique' in novel after novel.

Jane Austen's stress on rationality and enlightenment permeates her novels with vitality and emphatically demolishes the unfairness of laws relating to property and inheritance. In *Sense and Sensibility* the physical displacement of Dashwood family after the death of their father is an overt indictment of patriarchy. In Mrs Dashwood's delineation, Jane Austen highlights women's resilience and will power. She disdains idleness of mind and body. There is no room for self-pity or passive subservience for the unquenchable female spirit in Jane Austen.

Jane Austen deprecates affectation to entice gentlemen. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth is peeved by Mr Collins, who misinterprets her 'no' for 'yes'. The bottom line for an ideal woman in Jane Austen's corpus is moral autonomy. Endowed with active principle, brimming with self-assurance, fortified
with moral autonomy, the Jane Austen heroine looks upon marriage as a means of self-fulfilment and self-knowledge unlike Fanny Burney's novels, where marriage is deemed as a regressive and repressive institution. Dignified, elegant and undefeated women try to define themselves through marriage with men who are neither insensitive nor brutish. Displaying anti-maudlin maturity, Jane Austen makes her women comfortable with their sexuality and identity shedding the martyred aura of conventional self-effacing virtuous woman. Jane Austen blazed a new trail by turning constraining circumstances of her heroines into a positive source of strength.

This researcher has called into question Jane Austen's conventional image as a conformist and comedienne of manners. Deeply influenced by Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Jane Austen, laid great emphasis on female rationality, education, social status, society and empowering of women in marriage. Her heroines are not heartless rationalists but they believe in reining their sensibility. In *Sense and Sensibility*, whereas Marianne makes a virtue of her sorrow, Elinor stoically withstands bereavement, adversity and disappointment in love. Emma and Catherine Morland exemplify 'bildung' from naivete to maturity.

Feminist critics like Barbara Hardy, D.W. Harding, Mary Lascelles, Patricia Spacks have dismissed Jane Austen because of her pre-occupation with marriage. However, her place in the mainstream of intellectual tradition of Enlightened Feminism has been secured by the publication of Gilbert and Gubar's *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979) and Margaret Kirkham's, *Jane Austen:*
Jane Austen's involvement with marriage bespeaks lack of any other opening for women except teaching and working as governesses. Modern feminists should feel beholden to Elizabeth Bennet for rebutting Rousseau's statement that 'woman is framed particularly for the pleasure of man.' Married women enjoy equal moral stature with their spouses and are responsible for their own conduct. The master of the house is not elevated to a pedestal. Both partners take an equally keen interest in the running of their menage and in the upbringing of their offspring.

In *Mansfield Park*, Julia and Mary go astray because of Sir Bertram's repression and Lady Bertram's indolence. In this novel, Jane Austen questions parental repression which boomerangs in the form of familial disobedience. The stress is on the need for an ethical code and the imperative of moral autonomy. Jane Austen affirms individualism over conformism through Fanny's perception that we have a better guide in our conscience if we could but hear its still small voice. Jane Austen's stress on reticence is a reiteration of individual privacy, inner space and identity. Jane Austen foreshadows feminism by explicitly disavowing macho chauvinism. Her defence of the sensitive male is extremely relevant in the context of the recantations of Germaine Greer and Betty Friedan. Women cannot live in communities of their own and have to interact with men. In *Sense and Sensibility, Northanger Abbey* and *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen rejects the archetypal tall, dark, handsome knight tending to a dazed damsel in distress. To Jane Austen marriage is not the *raison-d'-etre* of woman's life, but is most often inevitable because of the complimentary nature of the
Emma, the only heroine to be the mistress of a mansion, is also quite assertive and domineering. Jane Austen without glorifying her, emphasizes the need to mitigate, if not entirely eliminate, the feminine vice of trivial fantasies which make them liable to male deception. *Northanger Abbey* is less a critique of Gothic romance and more significantly a treatise on women's comprehensive education. Jane Austen decries women's obsession with trivialities like dress, make-up, gossip and their disinterest in intellectual pastimes. Likewise, in her last novel *Persuasion*, Austen implicitly debunks male hegemony in the field of literature and education. Jane Austen's insistence on intellectual equality in marriage is quite radical against the backdrop of her milieu and anticipates latter-day feminism.

Women in George Eliot's novels are delineated as grappling with economic hardships, social ostracism, psychological and emotional trauma and thwarted aspirations. In George Eliot's aesthetics, women, like men, are presented as part of the cosmos inextricably woven into the intricate web of relationships within the community.

George Eliot foreshadows feminism in her sympathetic delineation of Hetty Sorrel, the eternal enchantress in *Adam Bede*. Hetty's incarceration for murder of her child is an oblique, indictment of the double standards of society. George Eliot's radical departure from orthodox convention is manifest in the portrayal of Dinah as a methodist preacher, while Maggie (in *The Mill on the Floss*) has the potential to be 'clever' through education but has to keep it under wraps.
lest she be deemed conceited. George Eliot makes Maggie come to terms with her identity and sexuality, but delves deeper into the subconscious by highlighting her heroine's vicissitudes. George Eliot's emphasis on spiritual and ethical grandeur in her female protagonists is a great irritant to modern feminists, as also her personal aloofness from the women's movement. Nevertheless, in her portrayal of women who refuse to be strait-jacketed by convention, who defy social norms if they thwart their physical cravings and aspirations, and in her emphasis on education as a pre-requisite for woman's freedom from societal trammels, George Eliot is manifestly and overtly feminist.

If Jane Austen favours a mix of head and heart, George Eliot prefers a blend of heart and soul thereby giving greater intensity to her psychological insights. The placing of the oars in Maggie's hands at the end of *The Mill on the Floss* is a milestone in the evolution of woman's emancipation symbolising the belief of the writer, that a woman is the master of her own destiny, capable of charting her own independent course in the stormy seas of life. Romola's taking off her wedding ring like Fanny Burney's the Wanderer, not only links these two feminists but is a symbolic gesture of the repudiation of the sanctimonious rubbish surrounding the marital bond.

In *Silas Marner*, George Eliot's eponymous hero overturns the traditional patriarchal concept of motherhood while Nancy's stoic acceptance of her childlessness is not merely unusual for her times, but would make many modern Eves seem antiquated in their notions. In *Felix Holt* George Eliot probes the nexus between sexual politics and class politics, presaging the pre-occupation of
writers of today like Bharati Mukherjee and Bapsi Sidwa.

*Middlemarch* focuses on the conflict between opportunity and aspiration of a modern day St. Theresa, Dorothea Brooke who eventually blossoms into a paradigm for modern feminists. Notwithstanding the denunciations of feminist critics like Ellen Moers, Anthea Zeman, Kate Millet *et al*, the novel is a vital document delineating the issues of women's liberation — women's education and women's metier. The novel confronts the stereotyped premises about naturalness of woman's place and work. *Middlemarch* anticipates feminism by inverting the lover-mentor relationship in that Dorothea takes the initiative in detaining Will Ladislaw and proposing marriage to him.

George Eliot's last novel *Daniel Deronda* presages feminism by making Gwendolen hit back at her tyrannical husband, deflating his mythical pomposity. Poor Gwendolen's incarceration in a loveless marriage reads like a modern tract on the restrictiveness of this social institution and may be viewed as a prelude to the writings of twentieth century feminist writers like Kate Millet, Susan Brownmiller, Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan and others. Gwendolen is far in advance of her times in wishing for her husband's death, since that offers the only escape from sacramental marriage. George Eliot projects her feminism in Daniel Deronda's exhortations to Gwendolen and others in her predicament to transcend their constrictive horizons through a passionate, intellectual pastime. George Eliot's empathy with women's aspirations resonates in her questioning of moral imperatives and in widening the bourns of her heroines emotional and intellectual aspirations.
At a time when feminism is in the throes of a crisis because of its inherent paradoxes and the recantations of its ideologues like Germaine Greer and Betty Friedan, the troika of Fanny Burney, Jane Austen and George Eliot has acquired increasing relevance as expressions of the irrepressible female spirit transcending the artificial constraints of their male dominated social milieux. Their novelistic oeuvre is a veritable Pilgrim's Progress of the female spirit through despondency and despair to an individual identity by ultimately surmounting the crippling constraints of man-made moral and social laws. The struggle for female self-liberation has been painfully grim and unrelenting, as the vicissitudes of the cavalcade of heroines named earlier indicates, but the gains have been considerable and feminism is today in full flower, thanks to the exploratory spade work done by Fanny Burney, Jane Austen and George Eliot. This indeed, is the measure of their achievement.