CHAPTER V

THE FEMININE CRUSADER
Ellen Glasgow established herself as one of America's most talented, dedicated and influential writers. Chronicling the struggles of a fallen South to reach accommodation with the legacy of the Civil War, she wrote several novels. In her works she sought a commitment to truth, the living pulse of experience. Sometimes laughing at Virginia, loving it but knowing it, she had given to the world a realistic portrayal eschewing sentimentality. She seems to be the quintessential Southerner, seeking valiantly to hold on to the old, while embracing the new. She had grown up in the lingering fragrance of the Old South and loved its imperishable charm, even when she revolted from its stranglehold on the intellect. Though
she rejected the old system, still she wanted to retain "grace and beauty" in the system.

Glasgow offers stunning insight into the lingering subtle effects of a history. The Southern mystique consists of a strong sense of family, of land, of seasons, of the old biblical traditions and a stern sense of morality. She grounds her fiction primarily in the experience of the South, especially Virginia. Her novels portray how life was in Virginia and how life is and can be. Without distortion and misrepresentation she depicts the cultural history of the South. Her novels communicate with shattering force and directness both the grim reality and its strength and beauty. Hence one could see its violence, poverty, harshness and also its strong family ties, individual sense of determination and cultural tradition. Glasgow captures the flavour and essence of her region.
without drowning in its idiom. She does not diminish her work by parroting already established Southern voices or depending upon stereotypes of landscape and character. It is the memories of the sounds of Southern conversation of the characters, of the heat, dust and smells of a Southern summer and the different configurations of a small-town society that provide the main impetus to her work. The hauntingly unique South comes out vividly in Glasgow's novels as a refreshing antidote to the run-of-the-mill Southern novels.

Glasgow turned to the past for her settings, recovering unforgettable images of a country. Intimate and particularizing details give her novels a compelling sense of immediacy. Landscape is an emotion as well as a place, a living entity, which she describes as sentient and changing, involved in an
intense life of its own. Glasgow employs the land and the landscape to delineate the characters both men and women who are shaped by it. Thus while shaping her fiction she has established a concrete means of portraying who her people are and what their lives mean in such social environment.

Though her dominant themes — survival, individual identity, freedom, power and community — link her to the literary heritage of South, her structures and forms address most clearly the uniqueness of her particular vision. She weds her intellectual themes to the life experiences of just plain folk who are rural and mainly middle class. Glasgow's South is peopled with impoverished Southern aristocrats, destitute whites, nouveau rich, bourgeoisie, coal miners, black slaves, matronly mamas, autocratic male and suppressed
female struggling to assert their self-hood. Glasgow's major thematic concerns are love, destiny, marriage, rigid class system, feminine fragility and defiance, oppression of the poor Whites and Blacks and the restraints of the conventional society. Glasgow exposes the inner nature of the ossified tradition with its self-deception and delusion, with the help of irony. Though her novels exhibit her comic vision, ironic and sardonic overtones colour her novels.

Her male characters are painted in grey and black shades — an obvious study of contrast to her sharply etched female creations. In the South, the chasm between the men's and women's culture is so wide that crossing from one side to other is difficult and rare. The things that little boys and little girls are encouraged to aspire for, have
traditionally been further apart in the South than in any other part of the country for a number of reasons, with the fear of miscegenation involving white women and black men being perhaps the most important factor. To keep white woman pure and consequently to keep white men's honour intact, women have to be kept caged, protected from accessibility to black men. Thus they have been encouraged to confine their interests to house and garden and to aim at only a remote connection with the outside world. The women have to give up their autonomy and the reins to the men and agree to stay locked up in women's culture and in exchange receive everything the men have which the men then let the women manage at the end of their manipulative tether. The function of men is to protect the women, and women in turn are supposed to relish their protection.
Thus different spheres are assigned to white women and white men in Southern Culture. They are like separate, transparent bubbles which occasionally combine and then separate again into discrete entities. The integrity of neither sphere is altered by its momentary merging with the other. The complexities of gender and race in Southern culture are enough to boggle the creative mind and force themselves into new channels of expression. The social contract that orders these mutually exclusive spheres between men and women is spelled out in Glasgow's works. South does not seem to be the best breeding ground for good husbands and fathers. Her earlier novels centre around male protagonists. But mostly men are pictured in an unfavourable light as selfish, thoughtless, incompetent, hedonistic and extravagant worthless persons. Among the weak and convention-bound male, we feel the absence of strong and heroic male. At times
ineffectual men are juxtaposed with strong, independent women. It looks as if Glasgow wants the Southern male to be enlightened that his chivalrous pose is a sham. In a scale of values, men touch the extremes. They are either vapid and insensitive or down right traitorous. The male characters have become vehicles for her scathing attack on a patriarchal society.

In the case of Glasgow, authorial sex determines the narrative and ideological content that she gives authentic description of the female experience. As a woman writer, she gives us female characters who are complex, whole and independent, in short, fully human. The contrast between the expected female role and the life Glasgow chose to lead provided her with plenty of material for her fiction. The iron rule of her autocratic father and the tutelage of her unstable brother-in-law made
her develop a self that is truly feminine. Glasgow's grasp of the women's culture is wide and deep. Her fiction reveals the pain and joy of human experience in general, of what it means to be a woman, in particular. Her fiction turns inward to explore the inner drama of characters, mainly women, who struggle to find a workable compromise between self and the outer world. Glasgow has created memorable gallery of women who experience many of the strains between inner needs and outer demands that form the consciousness of the contemporary women. She has realized that women are free only when unleashed from the expectations of society. The society demands forfeiture of the woman's consciousness and separateness. Glasgow pictures accurately the conflict in the self torn between a private self-conscious inner life and a compromised shared outer life. As Glasgow knows the hidden power of women, she treats the female characters with special
intensity and insight. She takes into account the dynamics of collective identity along with the demands the social codes place upon the women. Glasgow shapes her fiction so that both collective and personal identities become keys to character, theme and plot.

Even a cursory survey of her fiction about women clearly indicates certain patterns in her portrayal of women — patterns of passivity and patterns of purposeful self-ordained action. From victim to victor, Glasgow presents a wide range of women — from aristocratic gentle women, artists, musicians, teachers, seamstresses, shop-women, old mammies to young mulatto girls. She investigates every facet of the Southern women who is at once beautiful, angelic, passive, aggressive, static, narrow, rigid, progressive, radical, self-sacrificing, fragile and strong. Each of
her novels illuminates a different area of experience of the Southern women. Though in the initial stages of her creative writing, Glasgow placed male at the centre of her novels, presentation of the predicament of the female protagonists became her main concern later that the hero is slowly relegated to the background. In novel after novel, Glasgow deals with the basic problems of the Southern women and their reactions to them, their fight against them and their ultimate victory or defeat. While some struggle and surface, the others succumb. Some become victims of traditional forces or masculine treachery. Used as pawns and exploited, they are discarded at will. There are others who emerge victorious, fighting against odds with strong will and determination. Thus Glasgow delineates her women as sufferers and conquerors at once.
Mrs. Ambler, Virginia Ambler, Virginia Pendleton, Laura Wilde, Rachel Gavin, Mariana Musin, Mary Evelyn and Mitty Bland belong to the group of silent sufferers, affable credulous women, mere dolls to be manipulated. Glasgow emphasizes how place has affected the lives of the women. The society has assigned certain standards of purity and gentility to the women. Purity means enduring, not enjoying, sex within marriage and knowing that others' sexuality is wicked and will probably bring doom to women who indulge in it. Gentility's ramifications involve pride and propriety, the pride of knowing who they were, long after the old landholdings were gone, and the propriety of fine manners, carriage and dress. The trademarks of the tradition are soft hands and soft voices, concern for others, not self; refusal to dwell on subjects of ugliness, unpleasantness, violence, tension and strife; suave short-circuiting of all
embarrassing questions, cultivation and veneration of tradition and beautiful things; impeccable manners and spotless reputation. The Southern ideal entailed a set of values bent towards restraining the Southern belles to narrow notions of grace and duty. In the South, the image of womanhood is already cut out for her, stitched securely by the practiced hands of tradition, available for her to slip into, ready-made and is appreciated as a lovely woman. Decisions are easy for a Southern woman because they are dictated by formulas written out in some etiquette book. A woman's best virtue is that of renouncing herself and accepting the roles imposed upon her. The Southern female should be correct, solicitous and well-kept. Smooth routine structures her life. Following the beaten path, she keeps up appearance of decorum while glossing over the failure of the so called Southern tradition.
Skillful in using gracious manners, the Southern lady enchants the world into sharing her pretenses of dignity. As a woman is expected to transmit received truisms as unquestioned truths, she finds it more difficult than a man to rebel against the demands of tradition. As a woman gets no chance to gain varied experiences which help her to tell truth from sham, she is not in a position to test socially accepted rules. Tradition is a tyrant which turns a woman into exemplar and transmitter of its old virtues. The misguided mothers try to impose the tradition of shallow ladyhood on the docile daughters. The mother indoctrinating the ideal of Southern womanhood misses significant aspect of selfhood. Such a woman lacks opinion or goals beyond the domestic sphere. Accepting boundaries, she has never turned inward to assess her uniqueness. Many a Southern woman has died, without ever having once strained
towards building up her personality, without ever having once confronted her true reflection beyond the image of what her heritage has prepared for her. Even the most admired mother perpetuates such falsehood and the dutiful daughter replicates her mother and only the questing daughter flees for her life. Thus even a young girl is hampered in her search for honesty and autonomy because of lingering fear of all that is disruptive. Though she thinks thoughts the woman is not supposed to think, she tremulously retreats, fearing "what people will say". She stays at home simply and relives the Southern fallacies as her mother did. Only an ex-Southerner has a chance to grow, to break out of the vicious circle of heritage-bound continuity.

Glasgow wants the woman to come out of the habit of false, sweet pretensions and the meaningless trappings of the privileged elite.
The Southern ardour for the past is admirable when it encourages grace and courtesy. But it is dangerous in its refusal to recognize reality. Loveliness may not fully compensate for the shallowness and evasion inherent in them. Every day, the Southern woman will have to face traumas when she tries to live in the Southern ideal, for she must appear always hospitable, congenial and charming while resorting to deception and avoidance so as to keep the surface of her life "looking" smooth. She will have to minister, forestall, deflect, prevaricate, and suffer martyrdom rather than allow any scene to occur. She is compelled to take hypocritical and self-deceptive stance to preserve the semblance of fulfillment in her limited life. All constricting, debilitating stereotypes should be broken. Glasgow validates the necessity of struggling out of external constrictions. Whether enthroned upon a pedestal or imprisoned by fears and
obsessions, some women protagonists move from passive acquiescence to active choice.

Betty Ambler, Sarah and Sally Mickleborough, Dorinda Oakley, Gabriella Carr, Susan Treadwell, Milly Burden and Asa Fincastle freed themselves from both the demands of social convention and the more compelling demands of the beloved. Their quest is for self-possession. Freed from their interior prison, they gain a niche in the world. They yearned for a sense of place, a habitation that does not suffocate or dehumanize them. Some of them chose a lonely life. Loneliness once had been a torture. Now they regarded everything their eyes fell on with an equal sense of companionship. They had established compatibility with the world, finding companionship in the land and nature. Their stories affirm their faith in the ability of the women to stand on their own without
being cowed down by adversity. They were closer than men to Nature and the instinctual life. As a consequence, they were the great sustaining force in a family or a civilization. They showed their power to nurture, to sustain and to hold steadfast. They never agonized over a decision. Invariably they knew at once what is to be done. They were instinctively wiser than men. They at times viewed with amused contempt at the codes of honour and facades of rationality behind which men often lived.

In their new-found autonomy, they had not abandoned the family. They still formed the backbone of the familial life, doing a lot of constructive work. They did a lot to maintain the balance of life. As denizens of a male-ordered society, both pressures from within and without excluded them from advancement. Stultification of the educated
women in marriage is not possible any more. Some women broke the strictures of marriage that there occurred a shift in power relations. They decimate the patriarchal cliché that women are content when loved fully. Despair of a woman, who is locked into the loneliness of sexual bondage, has changed. Enclosure fixes the limits of sexuality and threatens the individuality. With a combative spirit, they fought and found themselves released from the enclosure.

Glasgow makes the invisible, visible. She foregrounds women's issues to dismantle the stereotype and compel the attention of the male to their problems. But Glasgow does not make her women score one over the men. Her novels are exploration of women's struggle to attain equality without pushing other people out of the way. Independence does not merely mean the freedom to do what one wants but also the
freedom to resist being imposed upon or used by others. Glasgow proves through her fictional women that women are persons in their own rights, and as individuals they have the personal dignity that comes with intelligence, competence, flexibility, maturity and a sense of responsibility. Her novels reaffirm that, that can happen without loss of charm or feminity. After all, the women only try to express their hidden aspirations and real identities.

Glasgow's novels explore, expose and turn the traditional roles inside out. Some heroines surprised and shocked their contemporaries but they forged ahead rejecting roles of embalmed mummies, of being pitied or considered inferior, of being confined to cooking and needlework. It is these domestic chores which had fettered the women more than the laws of country. The archetypal image of
the Southern women as passive, mild and docile had given way to image of the new women as assertive, dominant and strong. There is a flowering of physical and spiritual selfhood. Glasgow is well aware that self-assertion is the crucial key to freedom. True freedom lies in being authentic, in being oneself, in being liberated from conventions and inherited viewpoints.

But some women tried to salvage a sense of self within a system that tried to define that self for them. They were against the system which tried to shape them with superficial graces. So, rebellious, venturesome women boldly question the Southern values and qualms. Not tolerating the new images of selfhood, the society tried to ostracize them. They were made uncomfortable that they must flee the South. Rejecting their home, a symbol of tradition they go away only
to return in full maturity, finding their own way to salvation through trial and error. They had realized that they wanted involvement, not detachment but they had come back with the determination neither to dominate nor to be dominated.

Alternatives are never so neatly laid out. Choices can never be so definite. The choice is most often a chance. Some women opt out of the claustrophobic marriage and design their own life exercising their freedom. They were freed from the world of men, of trying to please, of the fear of not pleasing, of surrender, of self-abnegation. Untrammelled by their own emotions they led autonomous life. They rebelled against a system of values that infringed on their sense of themselves. They acted in accordance with their inner compulsion to be more complete and freer human beings than their society cared to allow them. But these
inner needs and fulfilling actions, bring them into painful conflict with people, situation, the accepted way of thinking, feeling and behaviour. But they were not iconoclastic. They did not indulge in extreme feministic action. They too knew no one can break all the rules, and that every freedom must be understood within the bounds of a shared social structure that can, if stretched, yield painful renewal, if shattered, end in tragedy. Hence Glasgow makes her women not to defy the society totally and isolate themselves. As these women rise out of the depths of degradation or depression, they come to terms with the truth of their position, with their social and historical place among others. Glasgow women miraculously hold on to dignity and selfhood. Her novels create a new basis for defining self and for accepting responsibility for one's action. As these women propel themselves forward on their own steam, asserting their own
right to recognition, they forge an acceptable female identity.

Though the female protagonists are modern new women, they have not forgotten they are women nor have they given up their feminine qualities like compassion and forgiveness. Glasgow has realised that "feminism is committed to the struggle for equality for women, an effort to make woman like men. But the struggle emphasises the value as they are" (Nahal 23). So she takes pain to remind her readers, everything that is old need not be thrown away while making way for what is new. She is cautious enough not to go to extreme levels in her concern for the welfare of women, and she exhibits remarkable restraint without which her novels would have simply become ordinary melodramas and not the sagas of suffering and a hymn to successful women. Glasgow has made it possible by the
incorporation of the cherished qualities of love and sympathy into the persona of her women characters. When they are in distress, unmindful of their personal problems, they invariably rush to the rescue of the needy and distressed, including the animals. In this angel-like compassion and consideration they seem to share the author's bent of mind. Often victims themselves and rebels there of, they show tolerance. They never harm anybody wilfully, nor bear ill-will against anybody. They do not carry grudge in their minds to take vendetta. They forgive magnanimously and accept even those who have wronged them, without any reservation. With a willing heart, they lend a helping hand and provide succour to those in distress.

Lest her heroines appear paragons of virtue and totally unreal, she points out their defects too. Some heroines indulge in pre-
marital affairs. Some fall an easy prey to the desires of flesh and pay the penalty for it as in the case of Roy Timberlake in *Beyond Defeat*. But Glasgow points out that society's attitude to the fallen women is changing slowly.

The South is inconceivable without black folk. They were the emblem of the white man's supremacy. They knew abject poverty, hard work and social humiliation, yet they endured and contributed a lot to the community, and gave Southern life a tone, a tempo. The old chasm of race has been bridged. There are no more shackles and racial discrimination. Instead of segregation, there is scope for full participation in all walks of life. Glasgow had recognised the worth of the negro. "She never used her negro characters for low comedy or sentimental effects. She saw them and understood them as persons of significance in their own right" (Rouse 140). Although she was
by no means blind to the condition of blacks in South, the theme was minor in her writing. She did not get much into the black psyche. Her scope was purposefully small and select.

Novels which emphasize setting are called local-color or regional fiction. They display a careful fidelity to landscape, customs, dialect and thought of the chosen area. With emphasis on faithful depiction, these stories belong to the realistic movement. Glasgow's careful and precise rendering of the South and her profound understanding of that milieu make her a provincial writer, but her novels extend beyond local significance. Transcending the particular, she creates characters and themes which are so universal that the South lacks definite claim to them. Her protagonists could easily be relocated anywhere without seeming out of place. Her abiding charm lies in her sanest and most
penetrated observation of human psychology and the relationship between man and woman. "While centering her emphasis on the shifting patterns of existence that confronted the Southerner and, specifically, the Virginian . . . she strove always to illuminate what she believed universal and enduring in human experience" (Santas 1). With her characteristic honesty and thoroughness, she forcefully presented the human predicament. As a critic in World's Work said, "She is not a 'Southern' writer nor a 'Northern' writer, but a writer of human life as it develops itself everywhere under the conditions that her stories naturally find. She has understood and practised this law of the best writing and escaped the snare of provinciality. . . ." (qtd in Rouse:131-2). Perhaps what J. Donald Adams commented on Glasgow ten years after her death explains her position clearly:
Too much perhaps, has been made of her role as a satirical critic of the Southern society into which she was born . . . but it is my belief that she will be remembered longer for her deeply considered reading of the human heart, studied by accident in the milieu she knew best, for her understanding of the age-old conflict between youth and age, and of the never-ending battle between the sexes. (qtd in Rouse:138)

Adams appreciated her "timeless themes without the least dependence on 'trends'. . ." (qtd in Rouse 136).
Glasgow has created a body of fiction unparalleled in its richness, variety and style. But the critical appreciation is distinctly disproportionate to her talents. Hence, it is not only worthwhile but even obligatory to examine her technique. Glasgow was not singled out as a youthful genius. Recognition was slow but steady. Along with her maturity came her mature works which received more perceptive critical attention. Reviewers started noticing the unflinching realism and the all-pervading humour which plays over the surface of the narrative. Stuart Pratt Sherman appreciated her "surgical use of satire" (qtd in Rouse:134) and James Southall Wilson wrote in praise of "the charm of Ellen Glasgow's witty prose" and her "practical artist's skill" (qtd in Rouse:135). He elaborates on her wit thus:

... A compassionate sense of the tragedy of life gives
an ironic flavour to her comedy of manners which makes its wit more biting, without turning bitter the kindliness of her tolerance . . . Above all, her wit is forever fresh — with an epigrammatic tang that makes everything she writes delightful. (qtd in Rouse:136)

Glasgow is a clear-eyed ironist who writes with an 'almost' disgusted tone about the frivolous and superficial social life of the South, its rigid class attitudes, its blind defence of traditional order, feminine fragility and its oppression of the poor white.

Past was not really past. It is alive very much in the present. The present is in fact an extension of the past. For the
individual the past may be a powerful resource or a crippling burden. But past is a necessary means for understanding and coming to terms with the present and the unknown future. Hence Glasgow uses the structure of the novel in such a way that it zeroes in to choose a spot from which the past may be understood and the future implied. Glasgow enters time at a selected crisis-point. Yesterday and to-morrow lying on either side of the moment, one could look through the key-hole of the present time at a long past and its meaning. Sometimes she gives alternating sequence of past and present. A revelatory still-spot or poised moment is the juglar for which Glasgow has an instinct. In some novels she follows the cyclic structure of departure and return home. With the help of circular or linear structure, Glasgow shows accumulating cause and effect. Her novels are chronologically compact. But they have an epic sweep. An epic novel must have a two fold
theme — a specific human story and a big general problem. Her novels fit into that category.

Glasgow shows keen understanding and comprehensive psychology. She sought a commitment to truth and brought out the living pulse of experience, by making the setting, atmosphere and language come alive. Her finely conceived art with its firm and lucid style makes her novels effective. Her novels are remarkable for beauty and clarity of style and for force in narration and character portrayal. Her craftsmanship is distinctive and distinguished, but it is the larger human, psychological and philosophical relevance assures for her novels a permanent place in Southern Literature
Glasgow gives sharply etched characters. Every individual character is distinct from the other. The characters are wholly rounded individuals, each vivid in his/her own idiosyncrasies, yet never a caricature. Her men and women are alive. In her portrayal of women, she shows variety and a fine distinction. Her women are reflexive, responsive and experienced. The men, in comparison, seem to suffer from self-deceit and hollowness. Hence Glasgow makes women the centre of her action. Her frail women are the puppets on a string, bold women are the pillars of strength and her helpful women are angels of compassion. But her novels prove that hers is far from being an androgynous vision. The study of her women characters shows that Glasgow's stance is embryonic feminism, non-militant and quite conservative.