CHAPTER VI

OTHER WOMEN NOVELISTS
OTHER WOMEN NOVELISTS

Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai do not exhaust the list of Indian women novelists in English. There are a few who have tried their hand at it - some earlier than they and some later. To the earlier group belong Raj Lakshmi Debi (Hindu wife or 'The Enchanted Fruit' (1876); Shevantibai M. Nikambei (Ratanbai : A sketch of a Bombay High Caste Hindu young wife (1985); Krupabai Sathianadhan (Suguna : A story of Native Christian life (1875) and Svarnakumari Goshal (The Fatal Garland (1915)). They have tried to present social problems regarding the status and plight of Indian women. An autobiographical element is prominent in these novels because the authors themselves have experienced discrimination. They all fought against social evils like female infanticide, the lower status of women, ill-treatment of widows, seclusion of girls and pleaded for female education, widow-remarriage and the emancipation of women. It seems that they really aimed at creating an awareness among Indian masses about the real predicaments of Indian women. Toru Dutt recognized more as a poet has also tried her hand at writing fiction in Binaca or The Young Spanish Maiden (1878). It is an unfinished romance set in an alien country. Regarding the
other works mentioned above, it should be said that in spite of their artistic crudity and the influence of the popular English novelists the Indian English women novelists are showing signs of maturity to claim a place along with the other Indian major novelists.

And with the turn of the 19th century more and more made their appearance, particularly during the period of Independence Movement. It was a period of self-awareness and social reform. The social reforms, English education and the struggle for national freedom made a tremendous influence on the social, cultural and political status of women. As a result women became aware of their position and status in the family and society. Naturally one finds it reflected in their fiction. A few such as Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai come out with realistic social themes and feminist problems. They may be treated as major novelists.

There are a handful of women novelists who have to their credit just one or two novels and their contribution deserves to be taken note of.

Mrinalini Sarabai's *This Alone Is True* (1952) deals with a new theme. Here, the famous dancer portrays an independent minded upper class girl who floutes
tradition to become a temple dancer. By doing so she wants to create an awareness among people that art is pure and dancing can be a decent profession. The author indicates that it is high time that society changes its attitude and get rid of its age-old prejudices against dancers. Santha Rama Rau's *Remember the House* (1956) is in a way an off-beat novel in the sense that it presents emancipated ideas and modern outlook regarding marriage by depicting a marriage of an Indian girl with an American. Her second novel *The Adventuress* (1970) deals with the story of an adventuress, self-made Philippino girl.

India is a land of many religions, castes and creed. The major women novelists have depicted mainly the Hindu Society. But what about the minorities? Particularly the muslims who enjoy the Personal Law? One might ask: what are the conditions and status of women in their society? A few novelists belonging to these minority communities such as Muslims and Parsis have written authentically about their peculiar mode of life, tradition, customs beliefs and social values. One of the early muslim women novelists who renders an accurate, first hand picture of muslim customs and practices is Iqbalunnisa Hussain. Her novel *Purdah and Polygamy: Life in an Indian Muslim Household* (1944) presents
as the title suggests the social life of a decaying society which degrades the status and position of Muslim women. It is a remarkable novel for its authenticity. Other novels of this type include Zeenuth Fatehally's Zohra (1951) and Attia Hosain's Sunlight On a Broken Column (1961). Zohra is a talented and self-willed girl who hails from a middle class family. But, she has to succumb to an arranged marriage against her personal wishes. She becomes a victim of a culture which has its roots in misinterpreted Quranic words and man-made rules. The author portrays the inner conflict and tension a girl experiences when she has to bend to the traditions and customs of religion and to the wishes of her elders. Zohra feels thus:

\[\text{The change from one phase of life to another was so abrupt that to her it was like going to sleep in one world and waking up in another.}\]

The life of other purdah clad women (Zohra's mother and others) is not all that happy. The novelist shows here the accepted norm of polygamy among Muslims and how women themselves support it. Zohra's mother is shown as so self-effacing that she requests her husband to marry again. Because she too like her husband wanted sons! Zohra's father-in-law too has practised polygamy. His wife accepts it though she is nagging at times. Zohra is not happy
in her married life with an old, orthodox husband. She like many muslim sisters who live in virtual prisons is disgusted with life. And to drown her frustration, loneliness, boredom and dissatisfaction with life, she turns to social work.

The social circumstances are such that she finally courts death. Here the novelist is so anxious to depict the atrocities committed on innocent muslim women and the aftermath of suffering, that she seems to be carried away with it. So the novel at times becomes sentimental.

Like Zohra, Leila in Sunlight On a Broken Column slowly becomes aware of the norms, values and customs of the 'purdah world' that regulate her life and finally decide her own status and position as a woman. She is exposed to the Freedom Movement and the accompanying social reforms, which leave a deep impact on her character. But her emancipated ideas are questioned and suppressed by her elders. She becomes defiant. She marries Ameer, the man of her choice. Like many muslim girls in real life, her mind is split by two forces - the respect for 'roots' on one side and her personal fulfilment on the other. Later she realizes that she cannot defy the family, tradition and religion for long and forgo their support. So she limps back to it. H.Kaveribai's Meenakshi's Memoirs: A novel of Christian life in South India (1937) and Perin Bharucha in
The Fire Worshippers (1968) deals with Christian life and Parsi life respectively. The speciality of these novels is that they give authentic, feminine point of view of life and its problems in Muslim, Christian and Parsi households.

Other novels of authentic social sagas in traditional Hindu families are In Transit (1950) by Venu Chitale (Mrs Leela Khare) and Inside the Haveli (1977) by Rama Mehta. While In Transit tells the story of a Brahmin joint-family in Poona, Inside the Haveli portrays a typical Rajput joint family in Rajasthan. Janki in In Transit is city-bred and educated like Jaya in Inside the Haveli. Both undergo silent suffering when they have to encounter a different atmosphere and social values in the family they are married into. Though at first they have a desire to revolt, sublimate the inner aspirations and decide to go according to the wishes of their husbands and his family. Both the novels show the inferior social status of women in the family, male dominance, crave for male children, authority of mother-in-law, worn out customs, traditions and the sad plight of widows.

Among the novels published during the period between the nineteen fifties and nineteen seventies mention may be
made of Lotika Gosh's *White Dawn of Awakening* (1950); Rani Ray's *Srilatha and Sampa* (1953); Shakuntala Shrinagesh's *The Little Black Box* (1955); Padmini Sengupta's *Red Hibiscus* (1962); Vimala Raina's *Ambapali* (1962); Tapti Mookerjee's *Murder needs a Staircase* (1962) and *Six Faces of Eve* (1963); Sally Athogia's *Gold in the Dust* (1966); Muriel Wasi's *Too High for Rivalry* (1967); Hilda Raj's *The House of Ramiah* (1967); Sita Ratnamal's *Beyond the Jungle* (1968); Meenakshi Puri's *Pay On the First* (1968). Vimala Raina's *Ambapali* needs special mention because it/a courtesan as its central character. *Ambapali* is a historical character who realises her inferior, social status as an object of lust and finally gains self identity as a human being by renouncing the life of flesh and embracing Buddhism. Her character and personal development into a fulfledged individual can be an example for the innumerable women doomed in immoral traffic.

As has already been noticed in the study of the four major women novelists, one finds a new trend in fiction of the nineteen seventees. The writers show a change in their outlook and attitudes towards women and society. They are in a way slowly discarding their inhibitions. There is a deviation from the traditional plot motives, themes, characterization and the 'Sati-Savitri' ideology of womanhood. Many
women novelists are not bothered about the conventional portrayal of womanhood or other social taboos. They discuss freely the day to day problems such as marital disharmony, sex, violence, divorce, extra marital affairs, role conflict, problems of working women, spinsters etc. Bharati Mukherjee's Tigers Daughter (1973) and Wife (1976) are of this type. In both the novels she deals with the problem of communication between a woman and the other members of the society. The problem of Tara in Tiger's Daughter is that, she is sexually assulted by Tumtumwala. She finds it hard to reveal that barbaric incident to anyone of her friends, relatives or acquaintances. How could she seek solace, help or at least a word of consolation in a world which expects virginity and purity in a girl? She realizes that in this orthodox society a girl has no escape route from self-suffering. Dimple Das Gupta in Wife also lives a frustrated life after her marriage. She is expected to follow her husband and meekly succumb to the orders of her mother-in-law and be satisfied with her limited role as wife. She being an intelligent, educated girl does not like to be nailed to the role of a housekeeper-cum-childbearer. Her predicament as an unwanted, dependent wife intensifies gradually when she leaves for United States with her Engineer husband. She sees visions, phatoms, hallucinations and wantom figures
haunt her days. Dimple's role conflict and agony is the agony of all educated suffering wives due who lack self identity and independence within marriage.

Nargis-Dalal's novels too do not follow the traditional plot-motives, themes and characterization. All her female protagonists crave for worldly pleasures and personal freedom. Her Minari (1967) tells the frustrations of Anita who is married to their Estate manager Ranjan. She is dissatisfied with life. She tries to drown her miseries arising out of marital disharmony by taking to Sketching. She finds art as an effective substitute for personal fulfilment. Her Two Sisters (1973) deals with the pitiable plight of Rita, the twin sister of Nina; Rita has to suffer humiliation, harassment and partiality because she is ugly whereas Nina is beautiful. No one understands her tormented psyche and tender longings, not even Remesh - her husband. She tries to drown her miseries in good food and books. Rita's life is a good example of the ways by which society and people value the worth of a girl. People value a girl not by her individuality or personal accomplishments, but by her external appearance and fair complexion. The Inner Door (1976) deals with the theme of enforced sainthood. And her fourth novel The Girls from Overseas (1979), as the title
Indicates is the story of five girls from Overseas: Michelle, Sandy, Jane, Getrude and Louise. By presenting these foreign women married to Indians, Nargis Dalal is able to portray the narrow-minded ideas of Indian men, the sexual morality, life in joint-families, the position of a woman as wife, the possessive authoritative mothers-in-law who "have this secret desire to sleep with their sons" and having 'a woman's eye view of life', and other defects and drawbacks of India and Indians seen through the eyes of these foreigners. In spite of all the social criticism and social problems raised in this novel, the novel remains to be a made up story sprinked with sex, passion and desire.

Raj Narasimhan's two novels *The Heart of Standing you cannot Fly* (1973) and *Forever Free* (1979) deal with feminist problems of the contemporary women. The protagonist in *The Heart of standing you cannot Fly* is a working woman who has to face problems in selecting a life partner and has to confront many injustices practiced in our society against women. *Forever Free* has a daring theme of a married woman seeking full freedom and personal fulfilment. She is married against her wishes. But she does not want to confine to a wedded life. She sets out for fresh adventures. She finally realizes that no man can give her solace. A disappointed,
disillusioned working women comes back to her old mother for emotional support. True, both the novels deal with contemporary social problems - the problems of liberated women. Though she depicts her female protagonists in search of identity, personal freedom and fulfilment, they lack authenticity because they are wayward, diffident and ignorant of what freedom is and how to make use of it. They look confused when they get freedom. They stumble on sex and love instead of moulding their individuality and character and emerge as fulfledged individual without the so called support of a man.

Veena Paintal tries to portray the agonies, frustrations, problems and inferior social status of Indian women through her novels. She writes:

I am not a feminist but I have watched very closely woman fighting endless battles to survive. They are considered second class citizens. Why this discrimination? I have endeavoured to draw a pen picture of Indian women, educated Indian women who can earn, who are independent in every way but still remain slaves of society, customs, parents, husbands and children. In these days of lib and equal rights woman is forever giving and not receiving ever why?...
Her novels _Rohini_, _Serinity in Storm_ (1966); _Link in the Broken Chain_ (1967); _An Autumn Leaf_ (1976); _Spring Returns_ (1977), and _Midnight Woman_ (1979) bear witness to this claim. She also portrays an emancipated woman in modern situations like Charisma in _An Autumn Leaf_. But, in spite of all these high claims of new themes and deviation from the traditional plot motives, her novels are slight works—novels which are like picture romances. Mention may be made of the novels: Veena Nagpal's _Karmayogi_ (1974) and _Compulsion_ (1975), Jai Nimbkar's _Temporary Answers_ (1974); Shanta Rameshwar Rao's _Children of God_ (1976); Shouri Daniel's _The Salt Doll_ (1977); Jyoti Jafa's _Nurjahan_ (1978); Manorama Madak's _Single in the Wheel_ (1978) and Anita Kumar's _The Night of the Seven Dawns_ (1979) in which women are the central characters.

In fact there has been a sudden outpour of novels by women writers after the nineteen seventies. There are a few who have gone for 'better-seller formula' too and produced novels which narrowly escape being regarded as pornography. Kamala Das's _Alphabet of Lust_ (1976) and Uma Vasudev's _The Song of Anasuya_ (1979) belong to this category. But many of the writers, as has been noticed, bring to bear
upon their works their experience in various fields. The tradition established by the four major women novelists is being carried on by the new writers who are now taking the stage.
CHAPTER VI

REFERENCES
