CHAPTER – IX

Conclusion

Women Empowerment

The main aim of this dissertation was to project the different ways in which society emasculates women and subordinates them as per its convenience. Our reading of the selected plays has brought into focus the various ways of female subjugations vis-a-vis female empowerment as also different dimensions of feminist theories. By introducing a feminist reading and using the feminist theories discussed, it emerges that women manage to subvert patriarchy in different ways and establish their identity.

The six plays analysed herein focus on the women protagonists who have consistently been exploited by a misogynistic society and have borne their travails with resilience and stoicism. These heroines successfully challenge the patriarchal conventions prevalent in society that threaten to destroy their identity and their self respect. The means of challenges taken up by each of these women is different; however what binds them is their common enemy viz. ‘patriarchy’ and their common end viz. ‘independence’. The thesis is a microcosm of society with its focus on gender distinctions and its after effects and aims to enlighten people, especially women on the negative energy that is generated when one half of the population tries to rule over the other half.

The patriarchal attitudes of society create favourable conditions for women's oppression wherein women start thinking of themselves as inferior to men. This is a dangerous situation as it reduces women's self confidence and self respect. However all our female characters face these critical situations with courage and dignity and
manage to retain their identity in a male dominated world. The fact that we have read these plays from a feminist perspective opens up new avenues in discussing the complex intertwining network of ideologies that implicitly work to suppress women. The analysis of these plays makes it clear that patriarchy cannot function as an independent entity. It needs the support of various organisations as well as individuals to operate successfully. Radical feminism insists that the biological family, the hierarchical sexual division of society and sex roles themselves must be reorganised for the destruction of patriarchy.

The sexual division of labour and society expresses the most basic hierarchical division in our society between masculine and feminine roles. It is the basic mechanism of control for patriarchal culture. ¹

Feminists believe that patriarchy is a historical and social construct that has evolved to suit men’s needs at the expense of women. For Gerda Lerner, women are even more responsible for the rise and spread of patriarchy. She believes that individuals especially women are lured by a patriarchal society to become the agents of their own suppression when they are rewarded for adhering to patriarchal norms.

This cooperation is secured by a variety of means: gender indoctrination, educational deprivation, the denial to women of knowledge of their history, the dividing of women, discrimination in access to economic resources and political power and by awarding class privileges to conforming women. ² Lerner thus concluded that patriarchy can only function with the cooperation of women and if women withdraw their support, the structure will collapse automatically.

In our plays, the female characters in the initial parts of their lives, play their parts of "conforming" women to perfection. Agnes Ebbsmith endured eight years of a grueling marriage; her exploitation ending only with her husband’s death. Rachel
Arbuthnot was the “prettiest of playthings”, a naïve, vulnerable woman who easily gave in to a man who “promised” to marry her. Mrs. Warren worked under exploiting work conditions at meager wages while Juno almost delighted herself in being at the beck and call of her husband and son. Maurya is a conventional Irish woman who has fulfilled her reproductive and domestic duties to the full, while the ambitious Abbie has grown up and lived in want and poverty. These women become feminists in the true sense of the term when they are faced with unforeseen crises that threaten to destroy their identities and jeopardize their relationships with their loved ones.

The various feminist theories discussed in Chapter II have been seen in a clearer perspective vis-à-vis our plays. While Liberal Feminism with its basic aim of equality, is reflected in almost all the plays, it is more prominent in *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith, A Woman of No Importance* and *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*. Marxist Feminism with its emphasis on women’s conditions under capitalism finds a just appeal in *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*. Radical Feminism with its fervent call to women to take care of their bodies as also the means of reproduction, and free themselves from the clutches of men, finds its echo predominantly in *Juno and the Paycock* as also in *Desire Under the Elms*. Psychoanalytic Feminism plays a subtle part in the analysis of some plays in this dissertation, especially *A Woman of No Importance* with regards to the bringing up of a girl, that affects her perception of herself throughout her life. Socialist Feminism that focuses on man-woman cooperation is reflected in the initial parts of *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith*. Existentialist Feminism that urges the woman to put her ‘Self’ first is reflected in parts, in *A Woman of No Importance* and in *Desire Under the Elms*. Eco Feminism that stresses on the woman-nature connection is seen extensively in *Riders to the Sea* and *Desire Under the Elms*. 
All the chapters which have been looked at from a feminist perspective have enabled us to better understand the travails of the women protagonists.

*The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith* begins with the rational New Woman, Agnes Ebbsmith on stage, out to experiment her advanced notions of love and marriage. The play highlights the viewpoints of the Liberal feminists’ clamour for equality as also the modern woman’s notions of love and marriage. It portrays the spiritual dimensions of a conservative society as also the attempts of the protagonist to break free of these dimensions. However I feel that above all else, the play celebrates the sheer spirit of a confident woman who has the courage to upset conventions and traditions and proves that it is not easy to break the will power of a woman. The chapter has not only shown her plight, but also the trauma of the two other women characters- Sybil and Gertrude. Notably all three belong to different strata of society, but their suffering cuts across these strata and we see them only as women emasculated by society.

The protagonist Rachel Arbuthnot of *A Woman of No Importance* is forced into leading a life of seclusion and anonymity for bearing an illegitimate child while her betraying lover becomes a famous and respectable man in society. According to George Woodcock, the play is concerned with the inequality between men and women and is suffused with the “general atmosphere of social protest”. ³

Mrs. Arbuthnot, throughout her life has been an ideal woman from the patriarchal viewpoint- coy, meek, and suffering. Having sinned, she has always kept herself in the shadows, believing that she is destined in living a nondescript life. She comes close to the analysis of the archetypal woman as drawn by Catherine A. MacKinnon in her essay on feminism vis-à-vis Marxism.

The discovery that the female archetype is the feminine stereotype exposed “woman” as a social construction.
Contemporary industrial society’s version of her is docile, soft, passive, nurturant, vulnerable, weak, narcissistic, child like, incompetent, masochistic and domestic, made for child care, home care and husband care.  

However the dynamics change when she is faced with the prospect of losing her son to his deceptive father. The “maternal” instinct combines with the “feminist” instinct in bringing about a drastic change in her personality. Mrs. Arbuthnot brings into focus the travails she has borne in being an unwed mother and a single parent. According to some feminists, motherhood itself is a burden that is borne entirely by women and in the case of unwed mothers they became doubly oppressed. History has shown that in such circumstances the woman has always suffered. The French feminist Nelly Roussel, in her speech referring to unwed mothers in 1904 emphasised that society had always treated them cruelly.

You alone will bear the weight of what bourgeois hypocrisy disdainfully calls your ‘fault’…. Society, the guardian of ‘morality’ will arrive to add its refinements….abandonment, disdain, misery, the impossibility of remaking a happy life for yourself through your labour.

Nevertheless when faced with the terror of her son going away from her, she rebels against the system that looks down upon fallen women. She here becomes a feminist’s delight in no longer having any qualms about societal reputations in identifying herself as a woman who was been an unwed mother. As the play progresses, she becomes more and more confident of her status as a mother and openly declares to her son that he was born out of wedlock.

This play too echoes the concerns of Liberal feminists of the importance of equal laws for women as also Radical feminists’ belief in equal moral standards and the significance of women being in control over their own bodies. The play showcases the triumph of the “fallen” woman. Mrs. Arbuthnot’s referring to Lord Illingworth as
"a man of no importance" is not only a fitting melodramatic finale to the play, but reemphasises the feminist stand that women, given the opportunity are capable enough of living their life without any male support.

All cultures consider women as inferior to men. This line of thought has continued till date when women are paid lower wages for the same work as their male counterparts. Mrs. Warren in *Mrs. Warren's Profession* has led a life of starvation and hardship because of the unequal wage system in a patriarchal set up. Shaw justifies Mrs. Warren's "amoral" profession as the only alternative for women to earn a "respectable" living. Mrs. Warren’s line of thought is very close to that of some feminists who believe that the unequal division of labour and unequal wages encourage patriarchy as men assume a dominant role and women are forced to retreat behind the men:

Job segregation by sex is the primary mechanism of capitalist society that maintains the superiority of men over women because it enforces lower wages for women in the labor market which keeps them dependent on men.  

The female protagonists in our play break free from this vicious circle of depending on men and lead independent lives. Mrs. Warren interestingly is a subverter of the patriarchal system from within the system itself. She is a clever businesswoman who goes into the brothel business and conducts her work in such a manner that her girls earn money as well as maintain their “respectability”. Her means may differ from those suggested in idealistic feminist viewpoints but her goal is the same as theirs viz. to make women independent and self respecting individuals. Though independent and well to do herself, Mrs. Warren knows that in most cases,
money matters are a male domain and women should know how to get money out of
the men.

The play with a strong businesswoman challenges the patriarchal notion that
woman’s place is in the hearth and home. It reasserts that when faced with a crisis,
women have the intellectual capability of charting their own path and creating a niche
for themselves as well as other women. The play is a strong treatise on the feminist
version of Marxism, which even at the apex of its struggle against capitalism never
took into account women as a class.

In *Juno and the Paycock*, Juno and her daughter Mary are victims of the
chauvinistic nature of society with its double morality standards in its attitude towards
men and women. Juno is initially a patriarchal delight with her unquestioning
devotion as mother and wife whereby Krause terms her the "universal mother." However, her daughter's crisis exposes the chauvinistic nature of her husband and son
and brings out the hitherto suppressed feminist aspect of her personality. She hardens
herself to go against the patriarchal norms of society in support of her daughter and
encourages her to be resolute and to face the crisis brought about by her unwed
pregnancy with dignity. She here echoes the activist feminists who believed in equal
treatment of married and unmarried mothers.

A joint action forces motherhood only on women and
places all the difficulties and consequences upon them,
but it does not absolve men. If we insist on attributing
“blame” we must attribute blame jointly. In fact, women
appear to have paid their share, since they carry not
only the natural but also the unnatural consequences
that tradition and law have forged for them and their
children.

The play also emphasises that concepts of ‘war’, ‘patriotism’ and ‘sacrifice’ are
patriarchal constructs to distract women from the issues that have more concern with
their personal and immediate lives. Feminist activists against war have always focused on the double trauma that women unnecessarily go through to satisfy the male desire for war and glory. Rosika Schwimmer, in a petition strongly appealed for peace when she met US President Woodrow Wilson as the representative of women from different countries, sent to end the war.

Men of the families of our leaders in fifteen countries are at the front. We learn that the homes of some are now hospitals for the wounded, and all European suffrage headquarters are transformed into relief stations. The stories which these women tell us of suffering, want, destruction of property, disease, atrocities and brutal attacks upon women are well nigh unbelievable in this twentieth century.

In Riders to the Sea, Maurya's defiance of the patriarchal norm of keening and losing hope on the deaths of her sons portrayed a very different picture of the traditional Irish woman. The circumstances she faces are enough to destabilize any person; however, her unconventional and composed reaction to the deaths of her sons seems to defeat the traditional argument that women are emotional weaklings. She is an example of a seemingly unheroic protagonist. Being old and physically weak she is far away from the requirements of the standard heroine. According to Susan Harris, Maurya follows all the patriarchal expectations of Irish society in being a traditional woman and mother, but she is not protected by this society when nature punishes her cruelly.

Consumed by maternal anxiety and grief, Maurya does not appear to have any dangerous unfulfilled desires. ...In Riders, Synge shows Irish women following all the rules- and the results are catastrophic. ...Maurya’s reward for her labour is the excruciating experience of watching her sons die.

Maurya’s steely courage in the face of the misfortunes heaped on her by the sea elevates Maurya from her ordinary status and she joins the league of strong
women who successfully resist the forces out to suppress them. She stoically accepts the fate that nature has in store for her. Her quiet determination shows that women can function successfully even in a calamity. The play, I believe is a strong critique on the theory of eco feminism and reflects that women are subordinated not only by society and culture but also by nature. It questions prevailing notions of the close association between women and nature that has always worked to the woman’s disadvantage and questions the patriarchal mindset that believes women are unsuitable for responsible positions in society because they are emotionally weak. The play successfully portrays that though Maurya is a woman, she is able to become independent of the forces of nature that suppress women.

Abbie in *Desire Under The Elms* is the only heroine taken up in this dissertation who exemplifies self confidence, courage and passion from the beginning of the play. She turns the tables on a patriarchal household with her native shrewdness. In her desperate urge to possess the farm, Abbie violates traditional patriarchal rules. For her the goal is important and not the means used to reach that goal. Dangerously ambitious, she destroys herself as well as her lover Eben in pursuing her desires. She has no regrets for her "sinful" deeds and remains brave even in the face of possible death.

Abbie's account of her earlier life shows the difficulty she had living in poverty, with a drunkard of a husband. Her former bitter experience hardens her into going in for a marriage of convenience with old Cabot. Eben's "maw" who represents one of the mother figures in the play is also a rebel against patriarchy in her own way. She haunts the Cabot household creating restlessness in the heart of the old patriarch. She goes back to her grave only when her "symbolic incarnation" Abbie 11 arrives to complete her vengeance. The play highlights the eternal struggle between man and
woman to gain authority. Abbie here would be the delight of the Existential feminist who becomes the ‘Self’ overthrowing the ‘Other’. Raghavacharyulu believes that "the father and mother, interlocked in a continual contest for power and authority have no escape from each other". Unlike the majority of women who give up when faced with fierce opposition, Abbie manipulates her opponents and wins them over to her side.

Temperamentally, all our heroines are very different from each other. On the one hand is the young and impulsive Abbie who does not think twice when making a decision, on the other hand is the cool and calculating Mrs. Warren who has in a way broken into the system to transform it. While Maurya who is old and helpless is steeped deep into patriarchal notions about womanhood, Juno breaks these very notions by working outside the house and shouldering the responsibility of the entire family. Mrs. Ebbsmith is a fiery woman who has realized the hopelessness of marriage and looks for happiness outside it, while Mrs. Arbuthnot who has never married is so resentful of her former lover that she rejects his marriage proposal.

The younger generation of women protagonists comprising Hester, Vivie and Mary and even Nora and Cathleen to a certain extent, is comparatively more independent, with some of them having high notions of women's rights and independence. Most of them, except perhaps Vivie, suffer the wrongs heaped by a chauvinistic society; however they do not give up and manage to challenge their debilitating circumstances.

Hester Worsley, the young woman from America symbolises all that is good in American culture and wanting in British culture. With her bold ideas and
uninhibited candour, Hester aims to transform the shallow aristocratic society of England as portrayed by Wilde in *A Woman of No Importance*. She also becomes a moral support to her to-be-mother-in-law with her comparatively modern outlook.

Vivie epitomises the qualities of assertion and confidence from the beginning of the play. Though she has lived in semi luxury all her life on her mother's money, she refuses to touch the money once she realises the evil source it comes from. Vivie is truly the "New Woman" in appearance as well as attitude. Powell however feels that though Vivie is smart and independent, her unconventional lifestyle seems too unreal. To Powell she represents a

> Caricature of the New Woman with her manly dress, bone crushing handshake and predilection for cigars and whisky,...with her uncritical focus on working and making money in a capitalist and sexist economy.

Vivie dreams of being independent, earning her own money and staying away from men. Society cannot emasculate this "masculine" woman. Turning her back on the ideal femininity propagated by society, Vivie becomes a feminist by charting her own way in life.

Juno's daughter Mary is duped by Bentham and becomes pregnant out of wedlock. Her lamentation that her child would not have a father shows the helpless and dependent side of her personality. It is only Juno's determination and courage at this moment that instills within her a sense of pride and a desire to work for her child. Mary's oppressive situation within the patriarchal system is the result of her placing full faith in a man like Bentham. She comes close to Dollimore's analysis of women who "perpetuate the contradictions, conflict, oppression and self oppression that characterize their lives". Thus Mary, like the other women protagonists in this dissertation is not the ideal feminist. She has her drawbacks, but what is significant is that she triumphs over these obstacles and is brave enough to face life as it comes.
All the female characters studied here are very different from each other, as are their different crises and opponents. The resistance that they give to their various oppositions is as varied as the final portrayals of these heroines. Mrs. Ebbsmith and Gertrude form a ‘sisterly’ bond and are to depart together from the evils of society into a purer world. While the mother daughter pair of Mrs. Warren and Vivie part ways to lead their own independent lives, the second mother daughter duo of Juno and Mary come together in the hour of crisis and decide to work jointly for the sake of the child. There is also an amazing bond between the to-be mother-in-law and daughter-in-law duo of Rachel Arbuthnot and Hester Worsley. The bold and outgoing Hester is very protective of the diffident Mrs. Arbuthnot and openly declares her support to her future mother-in-law, being willing to live with her in exile rather than leaving her alone. At the end of Riders, Maurya is left all alone with her two daughters. However she is not unhappy at this turn of events. She senses her own liberation from the terrors of the sea after her youngest son's death and heaves a sigh of relief at the prospect of her freedom. Only Abbie here, according to the views of society is doomed to a terrible fate of either death or prison; however at that juncture she is too "ennobled" to think of such "lowly" things and merely exults in her love for Eben.

In spite of their wide differences, all these women characters come under the banner of feminist heroines because they rebel against the traditional and patriarchal norms of their societies and establish their identities in a world dominated by men. These “modern” women in fact go beyond some of the heroines portrayed in the first chapter. Unlike the Greek heroines who sought refuge in death, these women challenge the prevailing living conditions with their attitude. Unlike the Renaissance heroines they do not resort to disguises to prove their points and unlike the flimsy
depiction of women in later ages, these women established touchstones regarding their strong stage presence.

Significantly the majority of the heroines of the earlier era belonged to the royalty, nobility or upper classes. Our protagonists however, are women who belong to the upper middle, middle and lower classes- women we can easily identify with and relate to. Incidentally, since most of our heroines belong to the lower class, they have the added misery of economic struggle apart from patriarchal troubles.

Interestingly, these women protagonists are not rebels in the conventional sense of the term. They work quietly and without male support to change the circumstances surrounding their own private lives and in the process challenge the social system itself. Their struggle is all the more heroic as they do not take any help from an outside source in fighting for their rights. Though they are not the ideal crusaders against patriarchy, they atleast make an effort to upset the deep rooted patriarchal tradition. They have their faults in that they earlier actually encouraged the system by following its norms. However as Ania Loomba says in the context of the Renaissance heroine, it is impossible to expect a perfect heroine in her rebellion against patriarchy.

It is crucial for feminist criticism to acknowledge rather than to efface contradictions in the female subject of this drama and not to duplicate the idealist search for a perfect revolutionary in demanding a unified heroine capable of providing a distilled opposition to a monolithic patriarchy as a pre requisite for a subversive text. ¹⁶

The male protagonists in all these plays cover a whole spectrum right from the typical male chauvinist who wants to assume dominance and undermine women to the parasitic male who lives off women; from the super confident dandies to the hollow idealistic losers.
In *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith* Lucas Cleeve, true to his name really seems to cleave on to the more intense Mrs. Ebbsmith. William Archer described him as “a nebulous man” who does not have the courage to act out his convictions.

In *A Woman of No Importance* Lord Illingworth with his wit and winning ways was a character rarely seen on stage. He has a pervasive influence on all around him and is a permanent dandy. However apart from his wit, the man does not appeal to us as he too lacks courage. In his youth ‘influenced’ by his mother, he betrays a pregnant Rachel. In his adulthood, it is only the temptation of having his son back that makes him propose to Rachel. His being turned down is a far bigger slap on his face than the actual hitting of Mrs. Arbuthnot with her glove.

In *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, Sir George Crofts with his capitalist background is a "common sort of scoundrel" who uses the cheap labour of women to increase his profits. The silly and overconfident Frank thinks of himself as highly desired by women. His attitude towards Mrs. Warren and Vivie smacks of false chivalry perpetuated to boost his own image. Vivie seems to have made the right choice in the end by rejecting his advances.

Jack Boyle in *Juno and the Paycock* is an affirmed male chauvinist. His male ego is hurt when his daughter becomes pregnant out of wedlock. For him the narrow patriarchal attitudes of society are more important than the emotional trauma that his daughter goes through. It is indeed ironic that in spite of being a patriarch within the family, he has no qualms about sitting idle in the house while his wife goes out to work. He makes a mockery of the ideal patriarchal family where the husband goes out to work while the wife looks after the house. Juno manages both these responsibilities while Jack sits idle. Johnny, the son of the house takes after his father inheriting his
chauvinistic nature as well as his irresponsible ways. Thus father and son burden Juno with the responsibilities of the house, remaining idle themselves.

Bartley's character in *Riders to the Sea* is hardly developed by Synge. However his short conversation with his sisters whereby he entrusts them with the responsibility of work outside the house shows his broad mindedness in considering women as equivalent to men. He stands out in this selection as the only male character who does not consider women as inferior to men.

All the Cabot children take after their father in their portrayal of a patriarchal attitude towards women in *Desire Under The Elms*. Ephraim, Simeon, Peter and Eben are all guilty of treating women with gross disrespect. They meet their match in Abbie who is a clever and hardened “feminist” in that she craves for and even works to achieve her prized possessions.

We thus see that the male protagonists in these plays are mere caricatures when contrasted with the women. They are portrayed as mere foils to highlight the courage and determination of the women protagonists. In the final analysis we can say that a feminist reading of the selected plays of Pinero, Wilde, Shaw, O'Casey, Synge and O'Neill exposes the various ways in which society tries to emasculate women and make them subservient to the male dominated society. From the feminist point of view, these women who rebel against the abuses faced by them are heroines who are out to subvert the patriarchal system. Heidi Hartmann is convinced that patriarchy results in inequality where the woman is the sufferer. She defined patriarchy as "a set of social relations which has a material base and in which there are hierarchical relations between men and women".17 The women protagonists in our plays challenge these hierarchical structures and aim to achieve the dignity and self respect that is the right of every individual irrespective of his gender. In spite of living in a conventional
society, they hope to live a better life and work painstakingly to reach their goal. Their victory lies in that they successfully overcome the obstacles in their path and lead a life of independence and self respect.
NOTES


12. Ibid.


