ABSTRACT

Patriarchy, simply put, refers to a society led by men in contrast to matriarchy which is a society led by women. However over the years this simple definition has acquired complex connotations that have often resulted in changing the paradigms of society and gender. It is by and large a universal phenomenon that has existed in almost all cultures and at all levels of society from ancient times. Patriarchy by itself is a powerful concept but ironically it does not function as a single monolithic entity but combines in an unholy nexus with other ideologies for a smoother functioning in its oppression of women. It is the most common and widespread form of women’s suppression that succeeds in creating within them feelings of inferiority and insecurity.

The phenomenon of patriarchy gives rise to a patriarchal culture that affects all aspects of our lives with its conventional norms. This includes not only a patriarchal society but also the conformist patriarchal literature prevalent in that society. Throughout history literature has been written most of the time by males from a male perspective where the female viewpoint is suppressed or at best ignored. Women in literary works frequently serve as mere props for the male heroes. They are either the vulnerable “damsels in distress” who have to be saved by the hero to prove his masculinity or they are the self sacrificing women who give up everything in the interests of their fathers, husbands or sons. Readers of literary works are traditionally accustomed to pictures of women who merely adorn a piece of literature as dependents of the male hero, without any personalities of their own.

Though most literature conforms to the patriarchal norms of society, not all writers are necessarily male chauvinists. Both male and female writers unconsciously portray the patriarchal tradition in their works because of the hundreds and thousands
of years of patriarchal culture that has unquestioningly become the norm in the minds of all individuals. An individual from childhood imbibes these norms and they naturally find expression in an author living within this patriarchal culture irrespective of his/her gender. Significantly the six playwrights analysed here are all male- Pinero, Wilde, Shaw, O’Casey, Synge and O’Neill who break away from convention by highlighting the concerns of the women protagonists.

This dissertation is written with the aim of reading our plays differently from the expected tradition by keeping the woman’s perspective in mind and exposing the various ways in which a male chauvinistic society tries to suppress women. The study examines in detail, the ways in which women respond to the misogynistic situations that arise in their lives and the means and ways by which they overcome their hardships. The six plays examined here viz. *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith* (1895), *A Woman of no Importance* (1892), *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* (1894), *Riders to the Sea*(1902), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), and *Desire under the Elms* (1924) have been selected because of the strong characterization of their women protagonists who succeed in disturbing age-old traditions and manage to lead lives of independence and self-respect. *Riders to the Sea*, though written earlier than *Juno and the Paycock* is taken up after it because, with its emphasis on the woman nature relationship, it links up with the following chapter on *Desire Under the Elms*. Though the six plays cover a period of 30 years between them and though the settings vary, the central issue in all of them remains the same viz. the inferior status accorded to women and the fightback they give to change this situation. These women are prototypes of feminists who believe in lives free of male dominance. They symbolize “woman power” that can successfully overcome all kinds of obstacles and pose a challenge to
the patriarchal culture. Though they are not rebels in the conventional sense of the
term, they possess certain qualities that make them stand out from the usual bunch of
literary heroines. A standard reading of all these plays would not portray the women
protagonists as the heroines; however a feminist reading of the plays highlights the
sheer grit of these women pitted against a misogynistic society.

The dissertation is divided into 9 Chapters as indicated below.

Chapter I: Introduction: Patriarchy-vis-à-vis Literature.
Chapter II: A Feminist Approach: Feminist Theories- Political & Literary.
Chapter IV: A Woman of No Importance: Double (Morality) Standards.
Chapter V: Mrs. Warren’s Profession: The Veiled Snare- Capitalist

Patriarchy.
Chapter VI: Juno and the Paycock: Women and War.
Chapter VII: Riders to the Sea: The Woman Nature Connection.
Chapter VIII: Desire Under The Elms- The Woman Nature Connection

The Argument continues……

Chapter IX: Conclusion: Women Empowerment.

**Chapter I- Introduction: Patriarchy vis-à-vis Literature**

The introductory chapter focuses on the concept of patriarchy and analyses its
birth and growth in Western culture. It also discusses the effects of this institution on
society in general and on people, especially women in particular. An attempt is made
to trace the roots of patriarchy as far back in time as the classical period in Greece and
the beginning of the Christian era in Europe. It emerges that patriarchy has always
been a strong masculine institution that works to the woman’s disadvantage, often
employing women against their own sisters in upholding the social and cultural tenets of patriarchy. Keeping in mind that people are influenced by life and literature around them and vice versa, this chapter takes a cursory look at the literature in different historical eras vis-à-vis the cultural, social and material situations prevalent then. The result is expectedly a foregone conclusion. Playwrights and authors have been influenced by their social surroundings. Since these surroundings reinforce traditional ideas of male superiority and female inferiority, these notions often creep into their works either explicitly or implicitly.

Then why do the authors selected in this dissertation break the norms with their portrayal of strong women protagonists and are they the first ones to do so? The chapter surveys selected texts, especially plays, from the Greek Classical Age upto the Modern Era and discusses the treatment that different authors have meted out to their women protagonists. It becomes apparent that strong feminist characters did not come into existence all of a sudden but have evolved over the ages. The chapter portrays a trajectory of women protagonists to show that confident women have always existed in literature, albeit they are treated differently and respond differently in the different ages.

In the Modern Age, women characters are more vocal about their feelings and more inclined to action rather than stasis. The Norwegian dramatist Ibsen was the pioneer of the “New Drama” wherein he portrayed women with strong personalities. He was one of the most significant playwrights who have influenced all the authors selected in this dissertation either directly or indirectly.
Chapter II - A Feminist Approach: Feminist Theories: Political and Literary

This is a theoretical chapter on feminism and feminist theories. The six plays examined in this dissertation were written at a time when the feminist movement was still in its teething stages in the West. Plays such as these may have helped the movement by encouraging women to take a stand. Simultaneously these feminist movements and the sweeping changes that the West was undergoing at this time may have also influenced playwrights to portray contemporary women’s revolutionary ideas in their plays. I have not followed any one particular feminist theory in this dissertation but have referred to several feminists and their works in examining the complex network of ideologies that are powerful tools for the subjugation of women. The chapter examines the birth of feminism in England and the West vis-à-vis the historical and material conditions prevalent then. It tries to define and explain seven basic kinds of feminist theories that surface occasionally in this work.

- Liberal feminism, the oldest school of feminist thought is the most basic form of feminism that focuses on equality between men and women in all spheres of life.
- Marxist feminism is an offshoot of Marxism that focuses on the economic dimensions of women’s independence.
- Radical feminism is a comparatively more assertive feminism that concentrates on how women’s bodies act as agents of their own subordination in a patriarchal society. These feminists believe that men dominate women not only in the public sphere but also in the most intimate private sphere of the home.
- Psychoanalytic Feminist theory focuses on the theories of Sigmund Freud that believe that the upbringing and cultural conditioning of individuals play an important role in shaping their perception of themselves.
- **Socialist feminism** is an encompassing theory that combines within it elements of Marxist, Radical and Psychoanalytic feminist theories. According to some Socialist feminists, women should work together with men instead of opposing them in different spheres of life.

- **Existential feminism** is based on the binary theory of the ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ wherein it believes that women always consider themselves as subsidiaries to men. Existential feminists like Simone de Beauvoir believe that all aspects in society come together in creating the image of a woman as expected by a patriarchal society.

- **Eco feminism** concentrates on the association between women and nature. Eco feminists believe that this works to both the advantage and disadvantage of women depending on the association between the two.

Vis-à-vis these theories, the chapter also takes a look at feminist literary theories that often affect our perception of a literary work. Each heroine in our selected plays portrays a combination of the traditional and the modern and displays elements of her feminist nature in the course of the play. Though the above theories do not cover the whole range of feminisms, they are significant to the development of feminist critical thought in general and to the development of the woman protagonists in the selected plays in particular.

**Chapter III- The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith: Religion and Patriarchy.**

The play portrays the strong woman protagonist Agnes Ebbsmith as a liberal woman, ahead of her times. She revolts against the sham morals of society by going into a ‘free union’ without the bindings of marriage. However she faces numerous obstacles that hamper her feminist approach. Hypocritical notions of society and religion combine to transform this liberated woman to a “mad Circe” who in a fit of
anger throws the Bible into the fire and immediately regretting of her action, retrieves it and consequently burns her hand.

The play does highlight her intellectual calibre and liberal outlook that would be considered as assets for a man in this society. However, for Agnes, these assets are the source of her misery. Upper class English society, in the persona of the Duke of St. Olpherts is determined that such a free thinking woman is a threat to the social order and she should be brought to toe the line, either through threats or through appeals, and he does use both options. Agnes, who, at this point, is also increasingly influenced by the ‘religiously moral’ priest Amos and his sister Gertrude, feels that her relationship with Lucas is a sin and decides to leave Lucas. But this makes Lucas more determined to stay with her. Agnes is torn between her two selves and finally decides to give up Lucas. She does battle heroically, but towards the end of the play, she cuts a pathetic figure having lost her ideals to a hypocritical society. In spite of her perils though, she manages to maintain her dignity and remains an unforgettable character worthy of analysis. Linking gender issues to national, religious, and class issues, Pinero also examines the limitations of mere advocacy rhetoric and personal exemplification in promoting social change. The chapter explores the type of feminist that its main protagonist has become and discusses some points of Socialist feminism vis-à-vis the play.

Chapter IV- A Woman of No Importance: Double (Morality) Standards

This play deals with the tragic story of a young woman who has an illegitimate child and lives her entire life in secrecy and anonymity because of her ‘sin’. The play questions the double standards of society that allow a man to go free but nail the woman as the culprit. Rachel Arbuthnot, the ‘woman of no importance’ is
shattered when she suddenly comes across her former lover who is her son’s prospective employer and with whom he plans to go abroad. Initially, Rachel is portrayed as meek and coy, who accepts her fate with passive submission. However when faced with the scenario of a grim fight between her son and lover, she reveals the secret of her shame and it is from this point onwards that she virtually gains in strength. She refuses her son’s idea of making Lord Illingworth marry her to ‘undo the wrong’ that he had done. Even when Lord Illingworth proposes himself, she refuses, thus serving a blow to the Victorian notion of marriage and motherhood. She is no longer ashamed of her unwed status and is even ready to go to distant shores that would accept her as she is.

She is ably helped in her moral struggle by Hester Worsley, the young American who has some radical ideas on the issues of sin and punishment. The two women restore the moral equilibrium that is put at stake with people like Lord Illingworth and his female “equal” Lady Allonby. At the end of the play, Wilde shows Mrs. Arbuthnot in her full feminist glory, striking Illingworth across the face with her glove, reminding him that she is not a woman to be taken lightly any more. The play, I feel, has echoes of Liberal feminism that is here explored as a viable alternative to women gaining self respect.

Chapter V- Mrs. Warren’s Profession: The Veiled Snare: Capitalist Patriarchy

Mrs. Warren and her daughter Vivie are clever businesswomen who succeed in the male dominated capitalistic business world in spite of many difficulties. I have here analysed Mrs. Warren from two aspects- professional and personal. It emerges that she is strong on both fronts. Shaw here portrays his protagonist in a favourable light even though she pursues a supposedly amoral profession. The play highlights the
fact that “prostitution is caused not by female depravity and male licentiousness but simply by underpaying and undervaluing women”. The darker side of capitalism is reflected here. After Industrialism, though women got a chance to go outside the house, they were doubly oppressed with longer working hours and lower wages as compared to men. Through Mrs. Warren, the play echoes the sentiments of Marxist feminists who believed women's liberation lay in a classless society that treated men and women as equal.

The daughter Vivie truly embodies the “New Woman”- ambitious and practical. She cares neither for romance nor for beauty, the typical traits attributed to women. Conventional patriarchal tenets are thus defeated when confronted with the iron will and determination of Mrs. Warren and Vivie. They are the prototypes of heroines in the New Age drama where women were treated with more respect than earlier literature. In his portrayal of the brave modern woman, Shaw inspired contemporary artists to treat the woman as a human being with feelings and not as a self sacrificing goddess.

**Chapter VI- Juno and the Paycock: Women and War**

In this play Sean O’Casey focuses on the tragedies of war. Set against the backdrop of the Irish Civil War, the play highlights the problems women face because of war. The evils of pseudo patriotism, hollow principles and the double standards of morality are explored in this chapter. The main protagonist Juno is initially a patriarch’s delight carrying out her conventional duties of being a dutiful wife to her lazy husband. She is also a doting mother to her handicapped son who believes in the principle of war, not work.
It is only after her daughter Mary gets involved in a relationship and becomes pregnant out of wedlock that her feminist qualities come to the fore. Here she becomes a pillar of strength for her daughter who is emotionally devastated after her lover deserts her. Juno defends her daughter against the shallow conventional reactions issued out by her husband and son. When the father demands that Mary be thrown out of the house, Juno accuses him of neglecting his parental duties throughout his life. The latent feelings of anger and frustration which had been suppressed by Juno now come to the fore. She not only decides to stick to Mary’s side but also encourages her to work for the baby. Juno and Mary thus combine the so-called “masculine” and “feminine” traits of a narrow-minded society to work for and nurture Mary’s child. In doing so they topple the patriarchal notion that a woman’s place is in the house. Traditional gender roles take a beating here as women become breadwinners while men sit at home. The chapter also discusses the position of Radical feminists who believe that women's biology and women's bodies are responsible for their oppression. The ending of the play is very significant as Juno decides to desert her shallow minded husband and stay with Mary to become a mother to her baby.

Chapter VII: Riders to the Sea- The Woman-Nature Connection.

This play explores the tensions between women and nature as against that between women and men in the earlier chapters. Set on a group of islands where there is an enormous struggle between humans and nature, patriarchy forms a backdrop to this play and is not a major element. The peasant woman Maurya cuts a tragic figure here as a victim to the atrocities of nature. The sea has devoured her husband, father-in-law and six young sons. Here too the main protagonist is initially shown as being
weak hearted. She “keens” on the deaths of her relatives and lives in perpetual fear of the sea, epitomizing despair and dejection.

However after the death of her youngest son, Maurya emerges as a strong willed woman. She rises above the grief and suffering that the sea imposes on her and gains a psychological victory. She refuses to “keen” on the deaths of her sons and declares to her daughters that she is now at peace. The long winded struggle between Maurya and the sea ends with the death of her youngest son. On the one hand we can say that the sea is victorious as it has managed to wipe out all the male members of Maurya’s family, however on the other hand Maurya emerges as the winner as she refuses to break down in the event of the worst calamity.

The play also relates to the theory of ecofeminism wherein women are looked upon as close associates of nature and vice versa. Here nature in the form of the sea is against the woman and hardly an associate, justifying the theories of some feminists that women should not be associated with nature.

Chapter VIII: Desire under the Elms- The Argument continues…..

This disturbing play of violent passions and emotions is set on a New England farm whose entire atmosphere is suffused with conventional patriarchal notions about women. The main protagonist here is Abbie who candidly admits to have married the old patriarch Cabot for his farm and money. She is the only heroine in this selection who shows ambition and passion right from the beginning. She gives primary importance to her own feelings and emotions, thus defying the rigid standards of an ideal woman. This play continues the argument begun in Riders…- whether women and nature are close associates of one another, with frequent comparisons of women with animate and inanimate objects in nature.
The play also focuses on the power theory and the unfair treatment meted out to women especially with regard to property rights. Thus Cabot in spite of professing his love for Abbie is hesitant to give her the farm and wants a male heir. The shrewd Abbie then lures her stepson to beget a son and cunningly turns the tables on the old patriarch. We may perhaps conclude that though patriarchy sidelines women in favour of men, women cleverly subvert the rules to achieve power for themselves. Towards the end of the play she kills her own son to prove her love to Eben. By doing so she breaks the woman nature connection and stands out as an unconventional woman. Though the play ends on a sad note with either prison or death for Abbie, her defiance of the laws and confidence in herself shows her to be a woman different from others.

**Chapter IX: Conclusion: Women Empowerment**

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. The six plays analysed herein focus on the women protagonists who have consistently been exploited by 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 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 these plays are read 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.

The women protagonists in the selected plays come from varying social, cultural and economic backgrounds. Their opponents may be individuals or institutions, and the means used to suppress them may be conventionally coercive or radically idealistic; however in spite of these differences all the women characters in these plays can be termed as feminist heroines as they rebel against the traditional and patriarchal norms of society and establish their identities in a world dominated by men. Though they are not the ideal crusaders against patriarchy, they at least make an effort to upset the deep rooted patriarchal tradition and strive to achieve the dignity and self respect that is the right of every individual. The women protagonists in our plays are not heroines merely in the context of the plays but can also be looked upon as role models by other women who silently suffer under patriarchy but nevertheless wish to establish their own identity.