CHAPTER – I

Introduction

Patriarchy Vis-À-Vis Literature

Theatre has always been a powerful art form in the history of civilization and has influenced the lives of people and vice versa. Throughout the ages this genre has been patronized by kings, noblemen as well as commoners. It has had its fair share of triumphs and trials; however, according to Judith Thompson “the two classic periods of theatre were Ancient Greece and Renaissance England”. In Classical Greece playwrights like Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides overwhelmed audiences with their tragedies and became touchstones of dramatic genius. In the west, especially in English literature, the form reached dizzying heights in the Renaissance under the aegis of giants like Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson and John Webster. The influence of their drama was not limited to their period alone but extended over the next four centuries with their plays becoming timeless classics. The domination of drama as an art form continued intermittently to the 18th century with playwrights like William Wycherley and Richard Sheridan being highly popular with the masses. After this period though, drama started getting marginalized and lay quite dormant for almost a hundred years, until it got a new lease of life in the late nineteenth century with stalwarts like Sir Arthur Wing Pinero, Henry Arthur Jones, George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde. Beyond England, its colony Ireland was also proving its mettle with playwrights like W.B.Yeats, J.M.Synge and later Sean O’Casey. All the above playwrights contributed to the popularity of this form in the Modern Age.
This dissertation explores six works of this period in this genre and basically
tries to exemplify how theatre has sometimes been instrumental in the promotion of
Patriarchy, but at the same time it has also promoted differential and unconventional
attitudes that challenge patriarchy. The six authors portrayed here were brave enough
to swim against the current in their portrayal of unconventional women in their works.

*The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith* (1895) by Sir Arthur Wing Pinero, *A Woman of no
Importance* (1892) by Oscar Wilde, *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* (1894) by George
by Sean O’Casey and *Desire under the Elms* (1924) by Eugene O’Neill are all women
centric plays. Some of these works were not even popular in their contemporary
period, but nevertheless left viewers feeling uncomfortable after the performance. The
above plays differed from the norm in having strong women characters in realistic
settings, that the audience could identify with. The plays portray the strength of the
women characters and show their indomitable spirit against fighting suppression of all
kinds. Though the six plays cover a period of thirty years between them and though
the settings and backgrounds vary, the central issue in all of them, from a feminist
perspective remains the same, viz. the inferior status accorded to women and the
fightback they give to change this situation.

Christopher Innes hailed the year 1890 as a watershed, marking the beginning
of Modern Drama in England, with Shaw’s lecture on ‘The Quintessence of
Ibsenism’. According to him the twentieth century was “one of the most vital and
exciting periods in English drama, rivaling the Elizabethan theatre in thematic scope
and stylistic ambition”. ²
The period saw the birth of the well made problem play that was concerned with not merely entertaining the audience but in also provoking them to think about social/economic/political issues highlighted in the plays from different perspectives. The characters almost always belonged to the upper middle class and the emphasis was on realism- in settings, in costume and even in speech.

At this juncture it is significant to mention the contribution of one playwright who singularly changed the course of modern drama. Henrik Ibsen’s plays had strong women protagonists who broke stereotypical moulds and challenged prevailing social norms and traditions. His dramas scathingly explored social and domestic problems and paved the way for introduction of ‘problem plays’. It was only in the 1880’s that his plays reached England vide translations by some scholars like Edmund Gosse and contemporary critic William Archer. All major playwrights of the time started reading his plays and were influenced in some way or the other. According to Anglo Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw, Ibsen changed the world of drama in England.

The influence which Ibsen has had on England is almost equal to the influence which three revolutions, six crusades, a couple of foreign invasions and an earthquake would produce.³

Sir Arthur Wing Pinero was a great admirer of Ibsen and openly acknowledged reading him. His ‘New Woman’ plays like The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith and Iris had scenes that seemed to be influenced by scenes of a few Ibsen plays.⁴ Oscar Wilde too admired Ibsen and according to Kerry Powell did have the desire of being labelled the ‘English Ibsen’. Oscar Wilde was highly successful in England as a wit and aesthete. His work though, was looked upon as superficial and elitist. When he wrote his ‘society’ plays that were largely women centric and serious, he did manage to shift the spotlight from himself to his work. George Bernard Shaw
adopted Ibsen’s technique of the ‘well made play’ and laid the groundwork for independent women protagonists. The influence of these playwrights was bound to spread to neighbouring Ireland. The budding Abbey Theatre was fortunate to have playwrights like J.M.Synge who aimed to not only portray the Irish perspective but went beyond and harboured a Pan European viewpoint in their plays. Though he himself denied it, most critics believe that he too was influenced by Ibsen whose works were being performed in Dublin at the time. His later contemporary Sean O'Casey was keen on projecting the real Ireland with strong women characters. Their plays met with great success in an Ireland that was growing increasingly distressed with its colonial bondings. A few years later, American playwright Eugene O'Neill, a master in tragedy too adopted this bold characterisation in some of his works making them stand out from other plays.

The New Drama as it came to be called also saw the introduction of the ‘New Woman’ who was a completely different ideal of womanhood. In 1894 the novelist Sarah Grand first coined the word to mark a sense of modern discontent with the traditional stay-at-home life of marriage and motherhood, deemed appropriate for middle class women.

The ‘New Woman’ was keen to broaden her experiences without submitting to male domination. She particularly deplored male sexual licence and the consequent risk to women’s health; adopted comfortable clothes in protest against tight-lacing, took up bicycling and smoking; demanded a university education and demanded full economic independence.⁵

These ‘New Women’ were enthusiastically adopted in the literature of the period. In modern drama, women were portrayed in a stronger vein and their characters were more ambitious and more independent than their earlier counterparts.
The end of the nineteenth century gave a large platform to different playwrights who dared to portray strong women characters in some of their plays with great success. Henry Arthur Jones and Sir Arthur Wing Pinero were amongst the first exponents of this “New Drama” which was to soon get more popular and fashionable with Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw. These playwrights also boldly experimented with the strong and positive portrayal of the ‘fallen woman’ and the ‘woman with a past’ on stage.

Each woman protagonist in the above plays sets a touchstone regarding her viewpoint of herself, and consequently of the world around her. Agnes in The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith is a liberated woman ahead of her times who believes in ‘free union’ between man and woman, as she has lost faith in the institution of marriage. Rachel Arbuthnot, the “fallen woman” in A Woman of No Importance loftily gives up her chance of “redemption” when she snubs her son’s father by refusing his marriage proposal. Both Mrs. Warren and her daughter Vivie in Mrs. Warren's Profession are determined to make it big in the world of business. They are clever businesswomen who make smart choices and succeed in the male dominated capitalistic business world in spite of many difficulties. Juno and her daughter Mary in Juno and the Paycock combine the so called "masculine" and "feminine" traits of a narrow minded society and decide to nurture Mary's child without any male help. Maurya in Riders to the Sea rises above the grief and suffering that the sea imposes on her and gains a psychological victory, while, in circumstances of absolute derogation for women, Abbie in Desire under the Elms gives primary importance to her own feelings and emotions, thus defying the rigid standards of an ideal woman. The courage of these women shows that if a woman is self-determined, no patriarchal obstacle can succeed in hampering her way.
This dissertation may be called a feminist dissertation by virtue of the very outlook that I have taken to the plays: by focusing on the women protagonists and highlighting their plight. However I do not follow any one particular feminist theory but have referred to several feminists and their works in examining the complex network of ideologies that subjugate women. Though patriarchy here is looked upon as the basic source of women's oppression, it is not the only culprit. Capitalism, pseudo-patriotism, pre existing notions of women's biology, cultural traditions, religion, double moral standards, gender biases, class differences and an undignified association with nature function from under the broad umbrella of patriarchy to form a deadly nexus in oppressing women.

Some works have been highly influential in the course of the development of this thesis. *The Creation of Patriarchy* furnished the basic framework on the issue of Patriarchy for this dissertation. It illuminates the various myths and issues revolving round patriarchy right from the Classical Greek Era. The author Gerda Lerner’s analysis of the historical creation of patriarchy provides insight into the cultural values existing since ancient times and also traces the steady evolution of patriarchy. In *Hidden From History*, Sheila Rowbotham follows Gerda Lerner in charting the historical tradition of patriarchy in England. Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication Of The Rights Of Women* laid the basis for equal rights for women alongside men for the betterment of society. Fredrick Engel’s ideas in *Origin of the Family, Private Property and State* highlight the systematic process by which emergence of private property undermined the importance of women both at home and in the workplace. Rosemarie Tong’s *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction* has been a thorough guide to existing feminist theories, their definitions and *raison d’etre*. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is unapologetic in its depiction of the Western
male viewpoint of treating women as the "other". Valerie Bryson’s *Feminist Political Theory: An Introduction* prepared the groundwork for different feminist theories used, to get a better understanding of the woman’s viewpoint in the selected plays. Patricia Clough’s *Feminist Thought* provided a better perspective on the term patriarchy vis-à-vis Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics*. Works of ecofeminists like Janet Biehl, Carolyn Merchant, Val Plumwood and Ynestra King provoked the argument on whether associating women with nature is a form of patriarchy.

Most critical works on the plays taken up in this dissertation explore the plays from different angles, but do not dwell on the critique of patriarchy, which I particularly want to focus on. There are hardly any critical books on Pinero or his works. Wilbur Dwight Dunkel’s work on Pinero, focuses more on his life than his works. Carl Selle in his introduction to *The New Drama* lauds *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith* as a compelling combination of religion, high society and the New Woman, in which the latter is defeated according to one viewpoint or validly rehabilitated according to another. Jean Chothia’s brief comments in her introduction to *The New Woman and Other Emancipated Woman Plays* look upon Agnes Ebbsmith as caught between the traditional and unconventional, between liberation and restriction.

Kerry Powell in *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* lists Oscar Wilde’s *A Woman of no Importance* as his “least successful comedy”. With an objective approach he writes at length of the influences, sources, language and wit of the plays. Katherine Worth in *Oscar Wilde* gives a compelling modern perspective on Wilde and has a clear perspective about Wilde’s treatment of women vis-à-vis their position in society. Peter Raby in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* lauds Rachel as a woman who challenges the stereotype; however he focuses more on the
social backdrop of the play whereas I would here like to discuss the challenges faced by Rachel as a single mother in a convention-ridden society with double standards.

Among the recent works on Shaw, Keith May in his book *Ibsen and Shaw* gives detailed pictures of Shaw’s life and his evolution as a dramatist under the influence of Ibsen’s social drama. *The Cambridge Companion to George Bernard Shaw* edited by Christopher Innes has some essays focusing on Shaw as a feminist. Sally Peters in her essay “Shaw’s Life: a Feminist in spite of himself” dwells on the strong women who influenced Shaw’s life viz. his mother. It cursorily glances at many of his plays that portray strong women characters including *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*. However these works look at the play more as a critique of the ills prevalent in society and portray society itself as being responsible for its problems. My emphasis here would be on the shrewd woman protagonist Mrs. Warren who subverts the patriarchal system from within the system itself.

David Krause’s *Sean O’Casey: The Man and His Work* gives details about Sean O’Casey’s personal life and his works. With reference to the play *Juno and the Paycock* he does give a sympathetic viewpoint of women by researching the hollow patriotic illusions where men go to war and women take over their jobs but not their positions. In contrast to this James Simmons quoting in Thomson’s essay “Opening the eyes of the audience: Visual and Verbal imagery in *Juno and the Paycock*” in *Modern Drama* is of the view that Juno Boyle has a very “narrow” attitude and understands nothing about political freedom or social justice. My emphasis in this dissertation though, is on Juno’s courage and her transformation from a ‘conforming, conventional patriarch’s delight’ to a rebel out to protect and take care of her daughter and grandchild independently.
J.M. Synge’s play *Riders to the Sea* with its theme of Irish countryside, suffering peasantry and Celtic dialect evoked huge interest in its relation to the Irish Literary and National Movement. Una Ellis Fermor in her book *The Irish Dramatic Movement* focuses on the destructive power of nature that wrecks the lives of the poor country folk. Mary King in *The Drama of J.M. Synge* focuses on the play as exploring the tensions between determinism and freedom and between the old way of life and the new. Declan Kilberd’s *Synge and the Irish Language* concentrates on the Celtic dialect that Synge has used in his plays. These books do not touch upon the effects that destructive nature has on Maurya, who keeps losing her sons to the sea. My focus is on how Maurya survives these tragedies with her strong determination and unconventional outlook.

In his book on O’Neill, *The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O’Neill*, Edwin Engel projects Abbie the main protagonist of *Desire Under The Elms* as an intelligent and calculating woman who successfully cuckolds her old patriarchal husband and aims to get possession of the farm. Louis Sheaffer in *O’Neill: Son and Artist* researches O’Neill’s love for his mother and its influence on his work while D.K. Raghavacharyulu in his book *Eugene O’Neill* portrays Abbie as a symbolic reincarnation of Eben’s dead mother whose aim was similar to Abbie’s - destroying Cabot’s patriarchal authority. In this dissertation my focus would be more on Abbie as an independent protagonist and an unconventional woman who upsets the notion that women and nature are closely related by killing her own son.

Before analysing the plays in detail, from the feminist perspective, keeping in mind the patriarchal context, it will be worthwhile to look at the broader context of patriarchal culture within which these plays were written. Patriarchal culture includes not only a patriarchal society but also the conformist patriarchal literature prevalent in
that society. 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. Patriarchal norms are imbibed by an individual from childhood and these naturally find expression in his work. As patriarchal culture decrees men as superior and women as inferior, this finds unconscious expression in an author living within this patriarchal culture irrespective of his/her gender.

Significantly, all the playwrights analysed here are male and they break away from convention by projecting a more balanced viewpoint of the female position. These plays are examples of a handful of literary works that defied the conventional tradition. The patriarchal stronghold seems to have had little effect on these authors who portray anti-establishment traits in their heroines.

Patriarchy, simply put is the leadership of men as opposed to matriarchy which recognizes women as leaders. However over the ages, the word has acquired negative connotations mainly because of the way men (ab)use their leadership. As against matriarchy, patriarchy is a universal phenomenon that exists in almost all cultures and at all levels of society. In the Western society the concept of patriarchy is so merged into the everyday lives of the people that it has become invisible and this is highlighted in the context of the plays. Modern feminist thinkers have given two different definitions of the concept of patriarchy.

a) In its narrow traditional sense patriarchy refers to the system historically derived from Greek and Roman laws in which the male head of the house had absolute legal and economic rights over the dependent family members.
b) In its wider definition patriarchy means the manifestation and institutionalisation of male dominance over women and children in the family and society in general.

As the definitions state, patriarchy starts from the smallest unit of the social order viz. the family, where the head of the family has absolute control over his wife and children. The master ruling over his slaves, the king over his subjects, the priest over his populace and the capitalist over his workers are also authoritarian forms to gain control and obedience. Patriarchy believes in the biological superiority of the male species and treats women as lowly and inferior creatures. It also upholds the sexual division of labour wherein men go out for work, for hunting or for war and women stay behind and take care of the house and children. Significantly, patriarchy does not function as a single, monolithic entity but combines with other ideologies for a smoother functioning in its oppression of women.

Traditionalists living in a misogynist society justify their unequal treatment of women from areas as different as theology, anthropology and literature. From this view point Chris Weedon’s definition of Patriarchy seems apt.

The term patriarchal refers to power relations in which women’s interests are subordinated to the interests of men. These power relations take on many forms from the sexual division of labour and social organization of procreation to the internalized norms of femininity by which we live.

It is not possible to ascertain exactly where, when and how patriarchy originated. Gerda Lerner in The Creation of Patriarchy advocates that patriarchy has been a continuous process existing for the last three thousand years and it has had a historical origin sometime and somewhere. Claude Levi Strauss in his book The Elementary Structures of Kinship stresses that the incest taboo lies at the root of all social organisation.
The exchange of women in marriage marks the beginning of women's subordination and male dominance.  

Feminists too believe that patriarchy has not come into being all of a sudden. They insist that patriarchies are "clearly formed through historical processes and structured by other dominant ideologies- of colonialism, of class and of caste which they in turn structure".

Religion in general and Christianity in particular are looked upon by feminists as harbingers of patriarchy. A strong thread binding the whole of Western culture is Christianity. Christianity has been dominant in the West right from the first century A.D. and the Bible has been respected as the word of God. Unfortunately for women, the Bible is rife with stories that are interpreted to show men's superiority and women's inferiority, explicitly as well as implicitly. As stories in the Bible are looked upon as examples of general human behaviour, it is not surprising that Western male chauvinists cite these stories to emphasise women's inferiority.

The story of Genesis states that Eve is created from a mere rib of Adam.

\[
\text{And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam,}
\text{and he slept; And He took one of his ribs, and closed up}
\text{the flesh in its place.}
\text{Then the rib which the Lord God had taken from man}
\text{He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man.}
\]

Male chauvinists use this story to convey the idea that a woman is secondary to a man and need not have a distinct identity. Feminists oppose this view and believe that being created from the rib does not make woman man's inferior but his equal. In 1617, Rachel Speight observed that woman was created from refined matter, while Adam was created from dust.
Shee was not produced from Adam's foote to be his low inferior nor from his head to be his superior, but from his side, near his heart to be his equall.  

Like her, a few women did stand up against these pre-conceived notions of women's inferiority; however they formed a minuscule group and went largely unheard and unnoticed. Misogynist ideas got stronger with the rapid spread of Christianity in the West. Biblical tenets were strictly followed and consequently patriarchy continued to have a firm hold. According to feminists, the Bible has often been misused by male chauvinists to halt the emancipation of women.

The Bible is not only written in the words of men but also serves to legitimate patriarchal power and oppression in so far as it renders God male and determines ultimate reality in male terms, which make women invisible or marginal.

Apart from Christianity, the values and traditions followed in the Western society have percolated down from classical Greece. I have here attempted to take an overview of classical Greek culture that is perhaps a basis for the patriarchal attitudes prevalent in the West. Gerda Lerner elaborates on the patriarchal nature of Greek society.

Women in Athens were excluded from the political life of the city and were legally lifelong minors under the guardianship of a male. Respectable women spent most of their time indoors. The major exception to the domestic confinement of middle class women was their participation in religious festivals.

Greece is hailed as the state that first introduced the concept of democracy. However, it is ironic that this democratic state did not involve women in any aspect of the body politic. Only a few select males were involved in the functions of the state. Though class differences reduced slightly during this period, gender differences continued. Bette Denich confirms the inferior treatment of women in her essay.
In ancient Greece women were lifelong jural minors without inheritance rights or any basis for autonomy. Passed from father's to husband's household, they were restricted to the domestic sphere and to the production of male heirs for their husbands' families and ancestral Gods.  

In non fictional works like treatises and documents, women's inferior status was emphasised. Aristotle, the famous Greek philosopher elaborated on women's inferiority in his theories in the fourth century B.C. He stressed on the essential difference between the "active male" and the "passive female". He believed that a woman's biological inferiority must also naturally make her inferior in her capacities and in her ability to reason. For him a woman was a "mutilated male", an incomplete human being.

The highly patriarchal nature of Greek society was not limited to its documented culture alone but also spilled over in its literature.

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 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 but my aim in this dissertation is to portray the characters of women protagonists who challenge patriarchy. These strong feminist characters did not come into existence all of a sudden but have evolved over the ages. Here I focus on a partial trajectory of women protagonists portrayed in drama right from the Greek Classical Age to the Modern
Age; to show that confident women have always existed in literature, albeit they are treated differently and respond differently in the different ages.

In classical Greek literature the domination of men over women was an implicit factor. In the tragedies of major playwrights of the time like Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, both men and women suffered from the disastrous effects of fate and hamartia. However, only the suffering of the man was highlighted as tragedy while the woman’s plight was ignored. Sometimes, the woman was portrayed as being strong and independent initially, only to break down under stringent patriarchal values of family honour. A brief glance at some plays of the period would help shed more light on this view.

In Sophocles’ *Antigone* (442-441 B.C.) the playwright boldly portrays a strong and unconventional protagonist. Antigone is an outright rebel who has the courage of her convictions to go against the dictum of Creon, the king of Thebes. Defying his orders, she gives a ritualistic burial to her outcast brother Polynices thereby inviting the king’s wrath. When she is buried alive in the cave to die a slow death, she shows no fear and chooses to end her life by her own hands committing suicide.

In his other classic, *Oedipus Rex* (429-428 B.C) Sophocles does not give much importance to the woman protagonist. He tells the tragic story of a mother and her son who unknowingly commit incest. According to the plot, both Oedipus and Jocasta are victims of fate and deserve our sympathy. However, Sophocles concentrates on the character of Oedipus while Jocasta is sidelined. It is the tragic hero who arouses audience sympathy and towards the end of the play his tragic stature overshadows the horrible pangs his mother/wife may have felt and which eventually led to her suicide.
In Euripides’ *Hippolytus* (428 B.C), the heroine Phaedra is a mere pawn in the larger scheme of things. The Goddess Aphrodite wants to avenge the insult shown to her by Hippolytus and makes Phaedra fall madly in love with him. Hippolytus happens to be Phaedra’s stepson and when she realizes the scandalous and incestuous nature of this relationship, she tries to keep her feelings to herself. However when she is betrayed by her nurse who reveals her passion to Hippolytus, she is devastated. Knowing that Hippolytus hates her and would reveal all to his father, she decides to die honourably. She commits suicide blaming her stepson for attempting to ravish her and is thus salvaged in the eyes of her husband.

Judith Thompson in her essay *The World Made Flesh: Women and Theatre* cites that Greek drama assumed female sexuality to be dangerous to the male dominated family and thus by extension to the newly formed city-state. As such, most often the plot required women to be subsumed within male patriarchal values. A common factor evident in the above plays is the choice that the women protagonists make, to end their lives by their own hands. This act would evoke horror in modern day feminists; however for the Greeks suicide was not an act of cowardice but one of courage. The point to be noted though is, that the women chose to die to reiterate the male patriarchal values of family honour and prestige.

In the West, drama gained importance only after the fourteenth century. In England, the Renaissance began in the sixteenth century and flowered during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Playwrights like Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson and John Webster continued the glorious tradition of tragedies that was the hallmark of the Greek Classical Age. A woman ruled
England at the time; however the position of women in society remained poor. Interestingly, women were treated in a better manner in the literature prevalent then.

In Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (1592) we see the portrayal of a strong woman protagonist. Bel Imperia is a beautiful woman who has a secret affair with a Spanish nobleman Don Andrea. After he is killed in battle by the Portuguese prince Balthazar, she takes a liking to his friend Horatio who returns her affections. However Balthazar who has taken a liking to Bel Imperia kills Horatio too. Bel Imperia decides to take revenge by punishing the persons responsible. She breaks free of the traditional feminine role of passivity to exact her revenge. She becomes an actor in Hieronimo’s revenge play and therein kills Balthazar and successfully revenges both her lovers before killing herself.

Many of William Shakespeare’s plays were dominated entirely by women. His comedies had beautiful and intelligent women running the show, often gaining the upper hand as compared to the heroes. In *As You Like It* (1599) the heroine Rosalind is a brave girl who has no regrets when her cruel uncle banishes her from his castle. Along with her cousin Celia she decides to go to the Forest of Arden to look for her banished father. In her journey she displays rare courage and stoicisim taking care of her younger cousin with a manly fervour. She has no inhibitions when facing her lover Orlando in disguise and heartily enjoys giving him tips on love, an unthinkable thing for a woman to do in the sixteenth century.

In *The Merchant of Venice* (1597), the shrewd Jew Shylock meets his match in the beautiful Portia. She outwits him in his own game of justice and saves her husband’s friend Antonio from certain death, with her arguments.
PORTIA: Tarry a little; there is something else. 
This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood; 
The word expressly are “a pound of flesh”. 
Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh; 
But in the cutting of it, if thou dost shed 
One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods 
Are, by the laws of Venice, confiscate unto the state of Venice.\textsuperscript{17}

However, it is worth mentioning that these heroines were effective only in disguise, when they were dressed as men: Rosalind as the youth Ganymede and Portia as the young doctor of law Balthazar.

In some plays though, Shakespeare did emphasise female chastity and the preservation of patriarchy. A super ambitious Lady Macbeth in \textit{Macbeth} has to suffer for her ‘androcentric’ desires while a headstrong Kate in \textit{The Taming of the Shrew} is ultimately shown as submitting to male superiority. His most popular play \textit{Hamlet} too reflected women in a poor light. The hero Hamlet's attitude towards his beloved Ophelia is degrading and insulting. In his anger he directs at her a diatribe on all the ‘sins’ traditional to women:

\begin{quote}
I have heard of your paintings well enough. God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another. You jig and you amble, and you lisp, you nickname God's creatures and make your wantonness your ignorance.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

John Webster’s \textit{The Duchess of Malfi} (1613) portrayed the character of a multifaceted woman. A caring mother and a carefree lover, the Duchess is also a proud and graceful woman. In spite of being a widow she is bold enough to go against patriarchal conventions by marrying a man of a lower status than her. She faces her patriarchal brothers with courage when confronted with their tyranny. She is eventually murdered by them but retains her dignity even in death exhibiting neither fear nor regret. Though the Duchess does not rouse feminist fervour she definitely shows that strength of character and pride are also womanly characteristics.
Most plays of the period reflected the male chauvinistic views of a society that regarded women's deeds as derogatory. Women were not allowed to enter the theatre and men played women’s roles. There did not exist a single woman playwright during this period, so all the literature written was from the perspective of the "superior" male. According to Demaris Wehr such an atmosphere creates conditions where the male point of view is accepted as the rule. She defined this condition as androcentrism, which has been the hallmark of most literature throughout history:

The habit of thinking about the world, ourselves and all that is in the world from a male perspective. This perspective is normative. Male norm parades as universal.  

Judith Thompson after thoroughly researching Greek and Elizabethan Renaissance drama found that both had some common factors with regard to women. They undermined the capacities of women wherein women’s voices were subsumed within a male world projecting a male oriented society through their themes, plots and characters.

In both cases, it is not necessarily the words female characters say that count: it’s the picture of the world that is being created between author, players and audience.

The Puritan dominance in England from 1642 to 1660 brought production of plays to a standstill. Patriarchal authority strengthened under the austere Puritans who replaced patriarchy as a substitute for the shaken rule of priest and king. They reiterated the necessity for female subordination and obedience to her husband, as ordained by the Bible.

The Restoration began with the ascent to the throne of Charles II who immediately reopened the theatres. However the new king did nothing to improve
women's status. In fact, the old social order was brought back as the basis of a new capitalist society and patriarchy was once more secure. The Restoration theatre was rowdy and in the comedies of the period women were treated in a derogatory manner, where they were looked upon either as sexual preys or predators. William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1674) is full of explicit and implicit derisions on women's behaviour.

Love! 'Twas he gave women first their craft, their art of deluding. Out of nature's hands they came plain, open, silly and fit for slaves...as heaven intended 'em. They have more desires, more soliciting passions, more lust and more of the devil.  

Though women started acting in the theatre during this period, their position in society remained as low as ever. The period also saw the first professional woman playwright in English literature- Aphra Behn. Her plays projected the real society wherein women may crave for higher degrees of autonomy and sexual expression, but their lives still fit within the boundaries of three roles: nun, prostitute, or wife. In her acclaimed play *The Rover* (1677) the three main women characters fit into the above three stereotypes. Hellena is about to become a nun, Angellica is a renowned prostitute while Florinda wants to marry a man she loves. All of them strive for independence within the limitations of the English system of courtship and marriage. They are proactive young women who exhibit the initiative and daring reserved for men. Over the course of the play, each takes upon herself the position of active wooer. Maidenly Hellena openly vows to go against her brother’s wish of entering a convent and escapes to find her true love. Her sister, Florinda runs away from home to escape marriage to a man not of her choice while Angellica, mad at her lover for betraying her, threatens him with a gun, the masculine symbol of violence. The women characters here have strong personalities and are witty, competent matches for
the men they meet. However the end reiterates that the women are subsumed within the patriarchal institution of marriage while Angellica retreats into the background.

Even till the 1750's women had no respectable position in society. Middle class women suffered the worst, as there were no decent jobs available to them. They had neither the material benefits of the upper classes nor did they want to go in for the lowly work of chambermaids and maidservants. Prostitution and crime were rampant as is depicted in Defoe's *Moll Flanders*. The invention of the printing press and the rise of the bourgeoisie changed lifestyles to some extent. Middle class women now had the leisure to do a lot of reading. These changes accelerated the growth of the novel during this period. Incidentally, many authors of these novels were women who wrote interesting stories revolving around domesticity, behaviour and marriage.

Fanny Burney, Sarah Fielding and Ann Radcliffe were prominent women novelists of the time. However, in spite of this burgeoning of female creativity and the popularity they gave to the novel form they were soon forgotten by history. Dale Spender after studying Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* concluded that for a male chauvinist like Watt men were harbingers of the novel form:

> With no further discussion of the women, no entry to them in the index and no explanation for his failure to discuss "the majority of eighteenth century novels written by women", Ian Watt indicates that it is not necessary to examine the writings of women to know it is of no account.\(^{22}\)

The Victorian age (in)famous for its prudish values confined women to the domestic sphere. A homely woman was raised on a pedestal, was idealised and was appreciated for conforming to the norms of society. Eva Figes in *Patriarchal Attitudes* notes the increasing male domination that rose steadily from the middle ages onwards reaching its highest point in the Victorian period when women were most
enthusiastically idealised and most thoroughly subordinated. Rowbotham notes the hypocrisy prevailing in western society, which treated its women as a curious mixture of "saints in the church, angels in the streets, devils in the kitchen and apes in bed."²³

The rapid growth of Industrialism weakened the strong edifice of patriarchy. Women now started working in factories albeit at lower wages. Though the economic basis of patriarchy weakened a little, cultural and sexual attitudes about female inferiority continued. Interestingly, some nineteenth century women novelists managed to make a place for themselves in the all male literary canon. However, it was common for women to write under male pseudonyms. Charlotte Bronte wrote under the pseudonym Curer Bell and her sister Emily Bronte as Ellis Bell. Mary Ann Evans assumed the male pen name George Eliot to bring out some of her most successful novels. By this time, women had also entered the university and were venturing into white collar jobs and the labour market. World War I further accentuated this situation as many women took to offices and factories to fill up the places left by men who were away at war.

Feminist movements that had first erupted in England at the end of the eighteenth century were now flourishing and women started becoming more organised and united and were able to stand up and demand their rights. John Stuart Mill had first introduced the idea of women’s suffrage on the platform he presented to the British electorate in 1865. He would later be joined by numerous men and women fighting for the same cause. Members of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies led by Millicent Fawcett were forerunners in the demand for women’s right to vote. They used peaceful and non violent means of protests in their demands. Later Emmeline Pankhurst co founded the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU)
with daughters Christabel and Sylvia as active members. The movement successfully ended in 1918 when the Parliament passed the Representation of the People Act granting the vote to women over the age of 30 who were either householders, or the wives of householders, or occupiers of property with an annual rent of £5 and/or graduates of British universities.

From about 1890 onwards the issue of women's position in the family and in the society evoked a lot of discussion. The "Woman Question" preoccupied the minds of intellectuals, social workers and governments of states. The era saw the birth of the "New Woman"-ambitious, idealistic and worldly wise. She was a contrast to the ideal of true womanhood cultivated by the Victorian society. She was not a self sacrificing individual but a practical woman who lived for herself. Novelists and dramatists were captivated by this character and began to explore this extreme form of individualism. Some like Oscar Wilde, G.B. Shaw, Sir Arthur Wing Pinero, Sean O'Casey, James Synge and Eugene O'Neill rejected the stereotypical roles of women that had existed for centuries and ventured to portray these New Women as their heroines. Their plays selected in this dissertation, are examples of a handful of literary works that defied the conventional tradition.

This dissertation is written with the aim of reading our plays differently from the expected tradition by keeping the woman's perspective in mind. Though the heroines here 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 six plays would not portray the woman protagonist as the heroine; however, a feminist reading of the plays highlights the sheer grit of these women pitted against a misogynist society.
The patriarchal stronghold seems to have had little effect on these authors who portray anti establishment traits in their heroines. Agnes in *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith* displays her fierce independence right from the beginning of the play. She is a free thinker who despises the allure of femininity and has no desire to embrace social conventions. Rachel Arbuthnot in *A Woman of No Importance* with a little help from her future daughter-in-law Hester is able to maintain her dignity and self respect in the face of impunities thrown by her former lover. Mrs. Warren and her daughter Vivie in *Mrs. Warren's Profession* are no emotional fools. They are practical, clever businesswomen who aim to be successful in business even if it costs them their personal relationship. Juno and her daughter Mary in *Juno and the Paycock* combine the so-called "masculine" and "feminine" traits of a narrow-minded society in deciding to care for Mary's unborn child by giving it the love of the father and mother. The old and pathetic Maurya in *Riders to the Sea* rises above the grief and suffering that the sea imposes on her. Refusing to keen and to bear anymore the sufferings imposed by the sea, she gains a psychological victory over her age old rival- the sea. Abbie in *Desire under the Elms* is a woman honest to herself. She gives primary importance to her own desires, thus defying the conventional notions of the self sacrificing wife and mother. The effective portrayal of these women shows that if a woman is confident, determined and strong no patriarchal obstacle can succeed in hampering her way.

It is generally debated whether Life imitates Art or Art imitates Life. Considering the second option, as a more viable alternative, it forces us to look beyond the work of ‘Art’ to also the ‘Artist’, to his upbringing, his values and to the circumstances surrounding his life. Chronologically, play wise Wilde was the first amongst the writers discussed here. Oscar Wilde, a reputed wit and forerunner in
aristocratic circles had no qualms in showing the flaws inherent in aristocratic society. Almost a reformer, he attacked duty, respectability and a sentimental view of poverty. A self-proclaimed follower of the cult of ‘Art for Art’s Sake’, Wilde’s flamboyant aestheticism earned him a lot of hostile press. His love for writing perhaps came from his genes, but not his talent. His mother Jane Francesca wrote revolutionary verses against the British under the pen name ‘Speranza’. Her work was hardly considered to be worthwhile, nevertheless, Wilde thought highly of her.

….she ranks intellectually with Elizabeth Barrett Browning and historically with Madame Roland.  

His mother’s strong influence over him perhaps explains his empathetic nature towards women. His portrayal of Rachel Arbuthnot in A Woman of No Importance can perhaps best be explained by a remark he once made that he was against the existence of one law for men and one for women and would prefer to see no law for anybody.  

Sir Arthur Wing Pinero, Shaw’s and Wilde’s senior in the field of drama was no stranger to fame and success. An actor as well as playwright, he became famous early in life with his comedies and farces. As the son of liberal minded parents who enjoyed the theatre, Pinero often accompanied them to see plays. He later learned the art of the drawing room drama from Tom Robertson and the Bancroft couple and was to use it successfully in his plays. His childhood dreams were turning into reality through his unflinching determination. According to Dunkel, Pinero, though employed as an apprentice to a solicitor, had set his heart on a career in the theatre.

In the evenings he went to the theatre whenever he could. This constant and unfailing interest, this concentration upon a single way of life, this absorption of everything theatrical available to him, certainly
explains why he later had only one increasing purpose-the writing of plays.26 After 1891, with plays like *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* and *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith*, Pinero offered the British audience their first glimpse of the “New Plays of Ideas”. Unfortunately he could not build up on these Plays of Ideas leaving the stage wide open for his far more talented contemporaries like Shaw and Wilde.

G. B. Shaw was amongst the most influential and popular in this group. His *Mrs. Warren's Profession* came out in 1894 27 at a time when it was unthinkable for women to live life on their own terms. Shaw was highly influenced by Ibsen, who was the pioneer in writing social plays concerning women's issues. Ibsen rebelled against romantic features and in his plays of social realism depicted strong women fighting against the traditional norms of society. *A Doll's House*, which showed the New Woman walking out on her husband created a sensation throughout Europe. The play attracted a lot of criticism because "the idea of a woman not only forsaking her marriage vows but also displaying a mind of her own and renouncing her duty of unquestioning obedience to her husband was almost indecent".28 Nora's decision of leaving her husband and children to do "a greater duty" towards her own self gave a new alternative to women, who up till now had remained shackled in loveless marriages. Shaw was impressed by Ibsen's socio realist plays and he picked up from where Ibsen had left. In his "problem plays", Shaw addressed hitherto unacknowledged evils of society and in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, he criticised the society for the treatment of its women, while rationalising Mrs. Warren's brothel keeping business. It may be significant to add here that in some plays Shaw was "influenced" by Shakespeare who depicted women in a positive light in many of his plays. In his personal life, though Shaw was not very close to his mother, he had a
high regard for her for being able to manage things well, without the support of her drunkard husband. His elder sister also influenced his ideas.

Both women rebelled against their gender defined roles and were crucial in Shaw's sympathy with the plight of the independent woman. His mother's assertion of female power and her defiance of assigned female roles concerning respectability, sexuality and career fulfilment affected Shaw.  

The above factors created a favourable environment for Shaw to launch his New Woman and go against the age old tradition of portraying the woman as a passive and vulnerable creature.

Sean O'Casey's Juno in *Juno and the Paycock* closely resembles his own mother who lived in the Dublin tenements in extreme poverty. Her determination to provide a good education to her children made her work overtime, catering especially to the needs of the weak eyed Sean. Though he was not able to get a formal education due to his partially blind eyes, Sean's mother compensated for this by reading aloud to him and kindled his love for literature. Obviously the mother played a very strong and supportive role in his life and consequently the mother figure in *Juno and the Paycock* is a strong woman who bears the difficulties of the entire family.

Like some of the other authors discussed here, J.M.Synge too had a single-handed upbringing after the death of his father. Synge was only one year old at the time and though the family was not poor, his mother showed a lot of courage and composure in managing the affairs of the house along with the upbringing of her children. Synge may have transferred the strong-minded nature of his own mother to that of the peasant woman Maurya in *Riders to the Sea*. He depicts Maurya as a
temperamentally courageous woman who rises above the grief and suffering that nature has in store for her.

Eugene O'Neill, the last author discussed here, lived and wrote in America, where his father was part of a theatre company that frequently performed in different cities. Hence he stayed away from home most of the time, which left young Eugene in the company of his mother. Though the women in most O'Neill plays are prototypes of secondary beings, in *Desire Under The Elms*, Abbie displays a rare combination of courage, ambition and passion.

All these authors were highly influenced by their mothers or some strong female personality in their own personal lives and probably it becomes easier for them to empathise with women's problems and portray a sympathetic male perspective towards issues that are looked upon as anti woman by feminists in a patriarchal society.

Another factor that brings the plays together apart from their portrayal of strong women protagonists is the Irish background of all these authors, except of course Sir Arthur W.Pinero. Shaw was basically an Irishman who shared a love hate relationship with his native country, and at the age of fifteen, he left Dublin and went to stay in London where his creativity flourished. Similarly Oscar Wilde too was born in Dublin but spent most of his time in England. Sean O'Casey was the only author who stayed permanently in Ireland and got associated with Yeats's Abbey Theatre. His plays gave a new lease of life to the dwindling theatre and restored its glory, earning him a place of pride in Irish theatre history. J.M.Synge lived mostly in Ireland and was closely associated with the Abbey theatre for some time. His *Riders* shows a close knowledge of the rural Irish life and portrays Synge as an author who was well
aware of the hardships faced by the country folk. Though he went to stay in Paris for some time, he eventually came back to Ireland where he spent the rest of his life. In spite of the fact that Eugene O'Neill lived and wrote in America, he was closely associated with Ireland. His grandfather had migrated from there to settle in America, and O'Neill was proud of his Irish connections. His "autobiographical" plays written towards the end of his career such as Long Day's Journey into Night and A Touch of the Poet show his preoccupation with his Irish heritage.

A detailed chapter by chapter analysis of The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith, A Woman of No Importance, Mrs. Warren's Profession, Juno and the Paycock, Riders to the Sea and Desire under the Elms will expose not only the subjugation of women in a patriarchal society but will also focus on some ways and means by which women resist this oppressive system. They manage to hold onto their own in a misogynistic society and portray the independent spirit that is the right of every individual.

The second chapter in this dissertation is a theoretical one that traces the rise and spread of feminism, especially in England and Europe. It also takes a look at the different feminist political theories that have risen as a reaction to political and cultural theories that subjugate women. This chapter reiterates that women are dominated in both the public and private spheres of their life through different means-institutional, religious, familial, social and cultural. The various feminist theories discussed herein try to dissect the reasons for this domination and provide solutions to women’s problems.

The chapter also looks at different feminist literary theories that arose as a reaction to the androcentric literary criticism that generally ignores the female
perspective. These theories influence our responses to a text and are able to change the androcentric perspective. The theories explore the dynamics between woman as reader and woman as protagonist vis-à-vis the themes and characters of the selected plays.

Chapter III discusses the first play in this dissertation viz. Sir Arthur Wing Pinero’s *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith*. Though the play itself was performed in 1895, it has been placed in the beginning because of Pinero’s pioneering efforts in England towards this type of woman centric drama. Jean Chothia who called this play a “landmark in English Ibsenism”\(^{30}\) lauded the courage of the protagonist Agnes who is a liberated woman without inhibitions and typical ‘womanly’ emotions. Pinero’s use of the "fallen woman" plot is an unusual one, with implications for the 1890s "New Women's" agenda that has continuing relevance even today. 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, and he uses the action of the play to explore the possibility of viable alternatives for women with a past. The chapter examines the type of feminist that its main protagonist has become and discusses some points of Socialist feminism vis-à-vis the play.

Chapter IV takes into account Oscar Wilde’s *A Woman of No Importance*, the story of a ‘woman with a past’. Rachel Arbuthnot the main protagonist is shown to have suffered for twenty years for bearing an illegitimate child while her lover Lord Illingworth has only prospered. The play exposes the sham morals of a hypocritical society that sets about different moral norms for men and women. Through the medium of a young American girl, Wilde takes a dig at the priggish English society.
The girl and Rachel come together up in arms against the evil Lord Illingworth and prove that he is a man of no importance. The play, I feel, has echoes of Liberal feminism that is here explored as a possible alternative to women gaining self respect.

Chapter V analyses Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* which deals with the life of a woman who takes to brothel keeping because there are no respectable avenues open for women. The play subverts patriarchal notions of woman and womanliness and shows the mother daughter pair who exemplify grit and courage and who boldly face challenges posed by a male dominated society. The chapter also discusses the ill effects of capitalist patriarchy that transferred the patriarchal structure from the home to the workplace, increasing the woes of women who were now doubly oppressed. 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.

Chapter VI discusses Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* where the issue of double standards of morality is taken up in the background of the Irish Civil war. 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 Irish preoccupation with war is here seen in a negative light as a harbinger of women's problems. Here too a mother daughter duo exemplifies courage in the face of trying situations. Juno and her daughter Mary are contrasts to the patriarchal expectations of a woman in their determination to survive in the hour of crisis.
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. This chapter raises a totally different picture about women's resilience to hostile surroundings. Set on a group of islands, the play shows the emotional courage of a woman who loses all her male relatives to the fury of the sea. The chapter debates the theory of ecofeminism that identifies women as close associates of nature. Though a patriarchal society exists here also, it forms a mere background to the play with focus on women's relation with nature.

Chapter VIII takes up Eugene O'Neill's Desire Under The Elms and is purposely put immediately after Riders for the similarity of issues raised. Here too women and nature are closely associated with each other by the male protagonists. The play traces the destruction of an entire family that had no regard for its women. The heroine Abbie is a smart and confident woman who is very materialistic. When she is denied possession of the family farm, she treats it as an insult and vows to get it. This goads her to take desperate measures to achieve her ends wherein she kills her own child. O'Neill provides two variations of the mother figure in this play- variations that he himself experienced in his relationship with his mother. One is the image of the all loving and nurturing mother while the second is that of the "virago"-the destructive maternal figure portrayed by Abbie. The play also focuses on the power theory that sidelines women in favour of men; however, women cleverly subvert the rules to achieve power for themselves.

In the concluding chapter, all the six plays are reviewed together with emphasis on the female characters that are compared and contrasted within a feminist
perspective. The plays were written at different periods and have different backdrops but have similar social set ups. The society reflected by Wilde and Shaw is London society, Pinero’s English characters are set in a scenic Venetian landscape while O’Casey portrays Dublin society. J M. Synge focuses on rural Ireland while O’Neill’s backdrop is rural America. However all these societies are typically male, and except perhaps for *Riders to The Sea*, all of them depict a culture wherein men are the ruling class.

What binds all the playwrights together is their exposure of the hollow anti woman attitudes of their societies. In doing so they reflect the general attitude of society towards its women. Through the medium of the above-mentioned plays this dissertation aims to portray the patriarchal treatment meted out to women in different societies with varied cultures. In focusing on the viewpoint of the woman, the dissertation highlights her struggle and her effective coping of the problems that come her way.
NOTES


4. In *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith*, Agnes’s throwing the Bible into the fire was reminiscent of Ibsen’s Hedda in *Hedda Gabler* who throws Eilert Lovborg’s manuscript into the fire. Gertrude in *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith* reminisces about her child in the grave similar to Agnes in Ibsen’s *Brand*.


6. The details of publications of these books as also of the books considered in the survey of literature that follows are mentioned in the bibliography at the end.


9. As quoted by Gerda Lerner in *The Creation of Patriarchy* 238.


14. Greek culture has been documented from the tenth century B.C.


27. *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* was written in 1894 but was banned by theatres for immorality and was produced only in 1902.

