ABSTRACT

Family has been an important object of examination for scholars who study social structures and their role in shaping the destinies of human beings. The alarming growth-rate in divorce, increasing rate of cohabitation, decline in interest in marriage, and decrease in birth-rate especially in America have been a cause of concern among family theorists. Invariably they are all preoccupied with the future of family as an institution. The aim of this thesis is to examine what happens to families in the select novels of Edith Wharton and Anne Tyler, and make an attempt to address the question of the survival of family in general.

In the first chapter, after giving a brief account of the life and works of the two novelists, a theoretical framework is constructed and categories relevant to a study of the family are formulated from the theories postulated by family theorists like Mark Poster, William J. Goode, J. E. Goldthorpe, A.J. Cherlin and Nijole V. Benokraitis. These theorists of the family draw upon psychology, sociology and economics for their theories. Mark Poster generates four models of family structures and develops categories of family structure, which are used in the analysis of the novels chosen for study. Upbringing, everyday life, psychic structure of the family, parental authority, age and sex hierarchy, family-society relation, romantic love, marriage, marital
disharmony, divorce and its consequences are the chief categories adopted in the examination of the novels.

In the second chapter Edith Wharton's four novels *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, *The Age of Innocence* and *The Children* are examined in the light of the categories developed in the first chapter. The analysis of *The House of Mirth* shows how the heroine's upbringing, the psychic structure of the family along with her association with the upper class families ruin her life and drive her to suicide. A study of *The Custom of the Country* reveals the conflict between the bourgeois of Apex City and the New York aristocracy leading to tragic consequences. *The Age of Innocence* enacts the conflict between the individual and the society whereas an analysis of *The Children* highlights the possible destruction of the family if the parents divorce and remarry frequently. All the four novels signify the value of the family as an institution.

The third chapter focuses on Anne Tyler's *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, *The Accidental Tourist*, *Ladder of Years* and *The Amateur Marriage*. Analyses of these novels based on the categories disclose a dissatisfaction in the married lives of the protagonists and the causes behind them. The disenchantment leads to the separation of husband and wife causing great emotional stress to them and their children. However the protagonists
tackle the problem and emerge successfully and reunite as a family, or form
new families.

The fourth chapter attempts a comparison between Edith Wharton and
Anne Tyler as novelists of the family. The comparative study of the novels
shows how the novelists diagnose the emotional problems in the members of
the families among themselves, and between the family and the society. The
emotional stress invariably results in separation or/and divorce. The novels of
Edith Wharton deal with the problems of young couples while Anne Tyler’s
novels are about midlife crises.

The fifth chapter draws conclusive inferences from the analyses and
comparison made in the second, third and fourth chapters. The chief characters
in the eight novels discover that marriage is like an uncharted voyage on seas.
The quarrels between husbands and wives cause anxiety to all the family
members concerned. However, they learn from their mistakes and either reunite
or form new families. The endings of the novels assert the survival of the
family as an institution. The shape and psychic structures of the family have
undergone changes without losing their vigour to survive.