CHAPTER VI

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CHAPTER VII

The Summing Up

The preceding chapters were devoted to a detailed consideration of women in the novels of the three women writers chosen for this study. They clearly belong to the realistic tradition in fiction that seeks to depict reality in its social as well as psychological aspects. The works of each of them are closely related to the social, sociological or psychological issues of their time. They afford us an insider's view of what goes on in the minds of women and how their consciousness and perspective of reality not only shapes their own lives but also affects those of others around them. While sociology in short may quantify the facts, it is the many-windowed house of fiction that can truly reveal the quality of experience and the conflicts in the deeper self of people and it must be conceded that these women novelists, each in her own distinctive manner, have given us a new insight into the female character.

The novels chosen for this study familiarise us with the problems of women, which are many in a country like ours. We realise that as girls, wives and mothers, Indian women have to learn to live under the heavy pressure of a fairly rigid tradition. Their personality and behaviour are closely interwoven with the whole framework of the culture they spring from. Contrary to modern beliefs, they are not always regarded...
as a symbol of progress and growth. Despite the changes owing to the impact of western culture and economic and educational progress, women have tended to remain essentially Indian in their sensibility and experience.

This is, indeed, part of the overall paradox of the women's liberation movement in India that the greater the advantages of liberation and new opportunities, the more troubled and perplexed is the Indian woman, confronted with the stranglehold of tradition and her desire to break free from it. The intense conflict between the external forces and the inner yearning is rarely resolved in harmony. More often than not, it leads to self-doubt and uncertainty on the one hand and a violent rebellion on the other. And neither situation can afford the sort of life she desires. Her bold assertions of personal freedom are usually undercut by the feeling of guilt at violating the norms of social and moral virtue. The situation becomes more agonising when a woman is allowed by society to be independent; while she continues to internalise the notion that independence is not a 'feminine' trait, she has not only to defy a stereotype but also to deny its validity. Then there is the class of women who take up jobs not through choice but because of certain compulsions, for they have no other option.
The new woman is thus caught between rejecting a traditional role and adopting a new one. She is torn between the desire to be free and the conformity to an accepted social standard. She does not want to get by in the world in the old way, while inwardly possessing little confidence to make it on her own in the new way. It will not be an exaggeration to say that the new woman often finds herself compelled to 'live in a kind of never-never land, see-sawing between two sets of values—the old and the new. Emotionally she has not made peace with either, neither has she found a way to integrate the two. ¹

In most cases, women themselves contribute to their submissive, stifled status. They are not so much victims of other forces—husband, family and society—as of themselves. The maladjustments that arise in a woman’s life are mainly due to wrong values attached to femininity. ² To think that a woman is more feminine because she is frivolous, sickly, weak and ignorant is absurd; the larger-natured a woman is, the more decidedly feminine she will be; the stronger she is, the more strongly feminine. Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, an energetic feminist feels that 'You cannot call a lioness unfeminine though she is different in size and strength from the domestic cat or mouse.’ ³

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The fact is that the frustration prevalent among women is an outcome of a struggle between a dying world and one that is refusing to be born.¹ Their ideas and their ambitions do not seem to harmonise. They do not enjoy the freedom to live their own lives, to be themselves and to choose their own course of action. They do not have even the freedom to marry whom they love, or not to have children if they do not want them. They constantly harp upon the fixed notion that a woman's true fulfilment and identity lies in her subservience to a man and that an ideal woman is one who is a good mother and a good wife.² The value of a mutual willingness to a balanced give-and-take in man-woman relationship has not been fully realised or appreciated. Each sex is fighting on its own without giving any concessions. Simone de Beauvoir aptly describes the situation in the following words—'Reared by women within a feminine world, their normal destiny is marriage, which still means practically subordination to man; for masculine prestige is far from extinction, resting still upon solid, economic and social foundations.'³ The average Indian woman considers marriage as the only suitable career for her. Women have been educated but in most cases this learning is

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(1) Hamdi Bey. 'Can he create a free character', Quest, Vol.1, No.4, Feb-March '56, p.15.


meant for the home. Hence, often it is not considered necessary or desirable to impart her any education beyond a narrow vocational training for her role as wife and mother.

In the works of Anita Desai, Suth Jhabvala and Kamala Markandaya, the problems are not the conventional ones, like the social evil of dowry, child-marriage and widowhood. Instead, the complications that are dealt with are more universal. The women, for a change, are seen thinking and acting not as men have traditionally viewed them, from the outside but from the inside, from a woman's point of view. There is, therefore, greater depth and authenticity about their characters. We have three different views on women by three different women. They all see this world differently, and yet they do not make us think that a woman is an enigma which to a male writer she generally is. They place their women characters in different situations— in normal social life, in situations of economic privation, emotional frustration, the typical helplessness of the weaker sex, family and social conflict, cheerful social interaction, and portray them in moods of quiet resignation, or when engaged in metaphysical speculation about their identity and human relationships.
What is, however, yet to be realised in their works is that woman is neither superior nor inferior to man. She is just different. Her physical, mental and emotional development differs from that of man. She is not a competitor or counterpart of man, she is his complement and together they form a complete harmonious whole. One also feels that there was room to include in their canvas the true fire behind the bright vermillion. And yet for all their limitations it has to be conceded that in showing that the self-effacing, passive heroines of old, little angels enveloped in a golden haze of romantic idealism—the stereotypes of Sita, Shakuntala and Savitri—are valid no more and that woman is as much a creature of fire and earth as man is, they have made a tremendous advance on the old inane models and given us some of the most vibrantly alive women characters in Indo-Anglian fiction. And therein lies their most significant achievement.

Since women in literature lead lives which parallel those of women in society. Newer models like Bimla, Saroja, Helen represent the various ways of coping with contemporary reality as well as of creating the kind of mind that the woman today needs to assume and play her new role. These novels serve as indicators of the current potential of fictional creativity as well as of confronting reality in India.
We are made to realise that the transition from the old to the new is not without tears but the new is emerging and therein lies the hope for the future.