ABSTRACT

The present work is a careful study of the concept of womanhood held by the Brontës, George Eliot, Thackeray and Thomas Hardy. It seeks to find out, from a feminist perspective, this concept in the literary works of these female novelists and compare it with that of two male writers, who also belong to the Victorian age.

This study extensively examines the literary works of these novelists in order to reveal their point of view about man-woman relationship and the position women held in society in the Victorian age. Also 'Woman Question' affected these writers and their reactions to the principles of this movement are highlighted.

This study, therefore, offers a comprehensive view of feminist writers. And to achieve this objective, the work is neatly divided into five chapters and a conclusion as follows:

Chapter I: Introduction:

The introductory chapter provides a historical, theoretical and cultural background for the present study. It consists of six sections. Section-I precisely defines the term ‘feminism’ both as a movement and an ideology. Section-II closely examines the concepts of ‘womanhood’ and ‘feminism’ which are interrelated to each other for both are concerned about women. Section-III gives an outline of the social history of feminist movement through the past two centuries both in Europe and the United States. It helps in understanding the real position of women in western society during this period. Women indulged in a struggle
to achieve their freedom. It also refers to a number of books written by eminent writers, whose ideas paved the way for the later feminist activists. This helps in examining these ideas reflected in the novels of the writers concerned. Section-IV explains the nature and function of Feminist Literary Criticism compared with Literary Criticism. It also highlights the contributions of women critics who studied Victorian women novelists. In the fifth section important feminist approaches are briefly discussed. These include Gender Studies, Marxist Feminist Approach, Psychoanalytical Feminist Approach, and Minority Feminist Approach. It is through these that the 'Concept of Womanhood' held by the writers concerned is revealed. Section-VI examines the status of women in Victorian age.

Chapter-II deals primarily with the concept of womanhood brought out in the works of the Brontë sisters. The novels of Charlotte Brontë show women as strong, courageous, upright and independent, a characteristic feature that makes them emerge as eminent women of the mid-nineteenth century. Charlotte Brontë for the first time shows woman's struggle towards self-realization and a new relationship between man and woman, a relationship based on equal footing is highlighted. It also shows that she was deeply concerned about the plight of women in Victorian society and was a feminist to the core. The concept of womanhood held by Emily Brontë is revealed in her single novel entitled Wuthering Heights. Unlike her sisters Emily does not present her heroine in the guise of a governess nor is she concerned about the problem of class distinction. Her concept of women is both conventional and unconventional. The woman is therefore both strong and weak. The two novels of Ann
Brontë come up with the view that, though youngest, she is very daring in the presentation of female characters. She creates women who are able to defy the unjust prevalent conventions of the day.

The Brontë sisters are concerned about the ‘Woman Problem’, though it is referred to indirectly in the case of Emily Brontë. It also indicates that they are aware of the plight of minorities, particularly the children.

Chapter-III deals exclusively with the study of George Eliot’s novels. As far as the concept of womanhood is concerned, it is observed that Eliot’s women, though aspirant and intellectual, are weak, unrebellious, rash and self-negating. Most of them represent the poignancy of unfulfilled potential and repressed desires. Also George Eliot, unlike the Brontës, counterbalances both feminism and patriarchy.

In Chapter-IV the focus of study is the concept of womanhood from a man’s point of view in order to compare it with that of the female novelists. Thus, W.M. Thackeray through his novels reveals that a woman should be strong enough to survive in this patriarchally-dominated society. Hence he created strong and even domineering women. The study also shows the miserable state of the women of his age. In his novels he also brings the ‘Woman Question’ to the forefront.

Chapter-V highlights Thomas Hardy’s complex and unconventional concept of womanhood. His women are more powerful, overwhelming and domineering than his men, to the extent that they can be described as “androgynous”. The only weakness women suffer from is that they indulge in flattery,
malice and envy. This study further reveals that Hardy, more than any other contemporary writer, was influenced by the feminist movement of his day. He reveals radical and progressive views in his novels that shocked the Victorian notions of morality for which he was vehemently criticized.

A conclusion of the end offers a brief outline of the findings of this study. It also sums up the implications of the present study relating to the concept of womanhood held and presented by the writers concerned.