

## CHAPTER - IV

### **PARENTS AND CHILDREN**

As in the other novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett, in *Parents And Children (1941)*, too, family relations are exposed. This novel depicts the relationships of parents and children. The family in this novel is a late Victorian upper middle class family. The novel exposes also villainy of a close friend.

Fulbert Sullivan is the father of nine children. The poor financial status of the family forces him to leave his family for South America. The meagre income doesn't allow him to run the family. While going to South America, he leaves his wife, Eleanor Sullivan, in the care of his dear friend, Ridley. After some days, the family receives a letter about his illness. The letter mentions that he is on the point of death. Then there is no communication between Fulbert and his family. The family members begin to believe that Fulbert is dead. Even the family observes mourning for his death. Ridley, Fulbert's friend, to whom Eleanor was entrusted, is an opportunist. He proposes to Eleanor. She also accepts his proposal of marriage happily.

They fix the date of marriage even meantime Eleanor's little son, by chance, spots his father in a nearby town. His grand-mother rushes to the town. She brings Fulbert back. Fulbert asks about a telegram which he had sent to his friend about his return. But it is disclosed that the friend of family, Ridley, deliberately hid the telegram. His purpose to hide the telegram was to get hold of Eleanor. After the return of Fulbert the old order in the family gets restored. Ridley's selfish motive of suppressing the news of Fulbert's recovery from his fatal illness is exposed in the family gathering. There the letter of Fulbert is discovered by a child in a diary of Ridley. He innocently reads the letter. This novel deals with a dark deed of Ridley's attempt to steal his friend's wife. He is committing this crime in the absence of his friend Fulbert.

This novel is regarded remarkable for its concentration on the study of children. The children in this novel are more active and sharper than the children in other novels. Miss Ivy Compton-Burnett desires to point out the parental favouritism and its effect on children.

Letters play a very important part in the plot. They are used to reveal inner most motives of

the characters. Incidents of revealing dark deeds are repeated in the form of dropping a letter, hiding a letter and discovering a letter. One of them is a letter sent by Fulbert to his Daughters Isabel. This special letter to Isabel provokes the gentle savagery of the jealous mother. It exposes love-hate relationship between the mother and the daughter. Eleanor destroys the letter of Isabel. Isabel starts hating her mother Eleanor later on.

The theme of incest is also significant in the novel. The legitimate children fall in love with children of incest. It becomes a symbol of complex family relations. The relationships between these children reveal the misdeeds in the family and of parents.

Ridley has subjected to a strong and sudden temptation. His temptation of illicit love makes him a villain. Ivy Compton-Burnett says :

"A good many of us, if subjected to a strong and sudden temptation without any risks of being found out, would yield to it."<sup>1</sup>

Ridley is the victim of the sudden temptation. But at the end of the novel he is exposed.

When Fulbert is leaving for South America, he says:

"Some one must share the guardianship of my infant children. My sons are young and younger to my wife than they are. I am dependant on some one outside."<sup>2</sup>

This shows his restlessness. He believes in his friend Ridley. He says:

"Then, Ridley, I must turn to you, we have never been close, or even perhaps congenial friends; but I depend on your character; you have our affairs in your hands; you would work well with my wife. Will you undertake the trust?"<sup>3</sup>

Ridley tries to justify his decision of marrying Eleanor. Once he discloses the photograph of Sir Jesse and Marlow, setting in a love like attitude, with their arms intertwined. And he says:

"You see I am not the only man who can go stray. I found that photograph amongst some business papers. It was taken years ago in South America, and it tell us what happened there. I took it with the intention of destroying it, but you set me another example, I will show that I am not the only person with the temptations of a man and not the only one who can yield to them."<sup>4</sup>

In day-to-day life greed for property and money lead to misdeeds like murders. The dark activities like illicit relationships, misuse of will-papers, hiding letters may occur with selfish motives. Ivy Compton-Burnett successfully depicts the clash between moral code and human behavior. This clash and conflict becomes the main action in this novel. So, the world created by her in this novel is not unbelievable. There is nothing unusual happening.

In this novel children are shown curiously observing the relationships of the family members. They are making comments too. Eleanor, the mother, has a strange curiosity in the personal letter of Isabel. Her selfish love and pleasure are monstrous. Her brutality is exposed later on.

Poverty of the family becomes the cause of misery. It prompts some members to break their relationships with others. The tyrannical grand-father in this novel is more like pagan God. The female tyrant- Eleanor, is neurotic, she has the power of nagging whereas the male-tyrant, Ridley, is a monster of egoism.

For Ivy Compton-Burnett the ethics and motives of honesty are very important. In this novel also she has raised and discussed the question of

honesty and dishonesty. The honesty of the family friend, Ridley, throws light on the core part of the family structure.

As Cicely Greig says -

“It all seems to be inevitable and the good and gentle submit once more to the tyrant and there is always a tyrant in Ivy’s novels.”<sup>5</sup>

Ivy Compton-Burnett has exhibited the tyrants in this novel in their time garbs and colours. The irresponsibility of Ridley and Eleanor for family life is exposed well. The greatest internal threat to a family group and structure is the possibility of incest. Ivy Compton-Burnett raises such moral issues but then she neither upholds nor condemns such type of relations. Ivy Compton-Burnett seems to look at these themes with the attitude of a psychologist. But certainly she is not a moralist. She never preaches for or against the sanctions of the church in the moral activities. And abnormal area of human experience is focused in a domestic world. It shows what goes on privately and secretly in the midst of the family. She makes fun of human weakness and follies. For Ivy, cultural health is a serious issue.

The material comfortable background sets down this novel in the Edwardian period. The family of Fulbert and Eleanor belongs to the upper middle class of late victorian era. Dishonesty either with oneself or with others is a capital crime committed by family members and friends. The life reflected in this novel represents reality. The motives of human beings that are base and fundamental are dealt with in this novel. These motives are the cause of human predicament. Ivy deals with human psychology and motives by pointing out the implications of behaviour and situational failings of human beings.

The plot of this novel leans on coincidence and improbable incidence. Fulbert goes to South America to earn money. He is ill. Then he is reported dead. But he unexpectedly is found out by his son and appears on the scene. The hidden letter is found out by a child. It exposes the dark character of Ridley. These co-incidences and importable incidences help to reveal the characters and to develop the plot.

The revelation of human nature is important for Ivy Compton-Burnett. Her tyrants are not entirely evil. Some of them have strong motives to commit the crimes and good chances of getting

away with them. The love between Eleanor and Ridley is not sensual or sexual one. It is not platonic love or love at first sight. It is just a need of time. There is a proposal of marriage and there is its acceptance. When Fulbert returns this agreement is broken.

Ivy's keeps focus on the family life and the family relations . There are conflicts between the social expectations and self-interested individuals like Ridley and Eleanor.

The gross act of deception receives public exposure. Ridley's deception is exposed publically. His villainy is unmasked. The ordinary and habitual daily acts receive habitual daily commentary from others. The commentators are in the form of guests and the very young children. The innocent children ask innocent questions. The older children are aware of the vulnerability of their elders. Some characters are shrewd and interested observers.

The psychological and physical killers shelter behind the relationship of keenship or friendship. In this novel the hierarchical family structure and relationships are examined.

The world of Fulbert is the world with conventional social order. It is with Christain morals.

Some characters violate christain morality and the commandments. Their see thing passions compel them to violet the rules and bonds.

The family unit of this novel has a strong cohesion. But when Fulbert leaves family and goes to South America, this cohesion sets shaken. It shows how the selfish and rulthless family members create havoc in the family. Virtues of good people or characters can not step such evils. The greed of a certain character creates a shock. So some characters are under mental strain. They can not maintain good relationship with other family members. The matters like legally, family economy, egoism, murder, revenge exist with equal force in the family life.

Fraud of one sort or another is practised always in the family structure for self-greed. Ridley hides the letter for his own greed. It is the act committed out of personal interest. It creates pity in the mind for Fulbert and his children. Family is an institution where there is some veneration for family bond. It is the conventional and sentimental unit. But its peace depends on the nature of its members.

The gap between the two generations leads to conflicts between the elders and the youngsters. Human wickedness in its true colours is exposed. Illicit relations and immoral acts are harshly criticised. The action of this novel takes place at the end of nineteenth century. She has chosen the end of the age of isolation and leisure the age records the rearing of the strange family growths. Ivy deals with the suspicious, the jealousies in the family. She is not interested in examining sexual passions. Her concern is to find out its effect on family life. She examines the lust for power in family life.

The attitude of Ivy Compton-Burnett is not to reform people and family. She just points out the problem faced by the families. Fulbert says -

“No chance of it with nine children. The cottage would not contain them. And I am not a guest: I am the son of the house”<sup>6</sup>

Fulbert and Eleanor Sullivan are not happy in the family. Fulbert was not the head of the family by birth-

“The death of an elder brother had given him a place to which he had not been born.”<sup>7</sup>

This shows that the families were governed and controlled by the elders. There was no respectable place for the daughter-in-law in the family. Eleanor asks-

“And what am I?” The answer is-  
“The son’s wife and the mother of his children”<sup>8</sup>

The two women in the family are shown by Ivy Compton-Burnett very effectively -

“The two women lived in a formal accord, which had never come to dependence; and while each saw the other as a fellow and an equal neither would have grieved at the other’s death.”  
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In the absence of her husband, Eleanor has to play a part of father too, she says -“I shall have to be father as well as mother here.”<sup>10</sup>

Eleanor’s sacrifice as a woman and as a mother is not recognised. Eleanor is not happy in her family. She has nine children. They are in different age-groups, so, it is very difficult for her to adjust with them. It is the genuine problem of the big family.

The elders in the family were having “a privilege” of ruling and controlling the family, and by

this divine right the other family members were suppressed. The elders were like tyrants. Eleanor feels- "I shall not feel the house is my home while your parents are alive."<sup>11</sup>

This is the reality of family structure of late victorian era. The family members felt that they were not living in their own homes but in their unhappy families.

This married couple of Fulbert and Eleanor certainly happy in their family. They have nine children with three groups- Luce, Daniel and Graham belong to young adults group: Isabel, Venice and James belong to school-room party, under the passive control of Miss Mitford, the governess and Honor, Gavin and Nevill belong to the nursery children, under the dispensation of the nurse, Hatton. In this big family, even the children are forced to work as Eleanor says-

"Their grandfather likes them to work in the morning, when they are not at Cambridge."<sup>12</sup>

They do not take a holiday. Every member of the family is conscious about the money and some sort of income Ivy Compton-Burnett was fully aware of

the big families, their economic problems and the sources of their income. Even female members of the family had to work to support the family. They had to pay the salaries of the servants, tutors, teachers and governess as so, it was very difficult to maintain the expences of the family. Many times, therefore, family members were involved into misdeeds like Fraud, misappropriation of property and murders.

Even Sir Jesse Sullivan, 79, is not happy to keep up his family . He has to spend money for education of grand children. so, he was not happy. His attitude towards his daughter-in-law is less familiar. This shows that the family structure and relationship in the family.

At the time of dinners, meals or luncheon they talk on household income sources. They talk about Fulbert's plan of going to South America to look into the estate. It is clear that there is no other source of income to provide for the big family. So, the family members have to go in search of work. The elders have the instinct to keep all the things away from the young. They cancel the simple matters from the young . This shows that the relationship between the elders and the young

members of the family. Fulbert feels his going to South America as an exile and banishment.

The children go on commenting on various subjects. Many a times they talk nonsense. Nevill is one of them. He talks nonsense. He uses third person for himself. He has infantine habits. There is incest. He wants to marry his sister. But his brother, Gavin, makes it clear that a brother cannot marry his sister.

Gavin says to him -

“You can't marry your sister”

“Why can't brothers and sisters marry?”

“Because they have to start a family.” It they married people in the same one, there would never be any new ones. But they can live together.”

“Do they have any children then?”

“I don't think they do so often. But they can adopt some”<sup>13</sup>

Ivy Compton-Burnett's children characters seem mature and critical. They are inquisitive. But many a times they are problem children. In those days, the large size families forced the elders to be less caring for children. They have to employ private tutors, teachers and governesses to teach these children. There were nurseries and schools in the

big families. Ivy Compton-Burnett's own family was a very big family. Her father got married twice. There were nine children in her family, too. She was greatly impressed by the behaviour of her brothers and sisters. So, in her novels we find children characters talking on various subjects. These children are conscious of the nature of the elders. "He is a girlie," said Nevill, recalling his father's attitude to his sisters" <sup>14</sup>

The school-room is the most neglected thing in the family. Teachers and governess are very ill paid. Ivy describes the situations:

"It was the family practice to economise in materials rather than in time. It seldom struck Eleanor or Regan that a few shillings might be well spent. Shillings were never well spent to them, only by necessity or compulsion. Two governesses came under the last head, and money was allotted to the purpose, but to do them justice in the smallest possible amount."<sup>15</sup>

The discussion between two children Gavin and Mullet Honor-shows that the position of the family and economy of the family-

"What happened to the house?" said Honor.

“It was sold to pay debts. My father was in debt, as a man in his place would be.”  
“He really ought not to have kept all those servants.  
“Well, no, he ought not, But he could hardly change from the way his family had always lived.”<sup>16</sup>

This shows upper middle class victorian family structure and its deporing state. A woman like Mullet has to work as a nurse. Because of economic problem source women were forced to remain unmarried. They prefered to live single . The following conversation between Miss Mitford, Venice, Isabella and other is very interesting.

“What would you have liked to be? said Venice. “What I am, with enough money to live on.” There was silence. “Just my plain, odd self,” said miss Mitford, “You would not have liked to be married?” “No, I never wanted a full, normal life.”<sup>17</sup>

Pilbeam is the new governess in the family who is teased by her students. When she asks for a book of Arithmetic, the children are rude and they keep a snake in it and hand over it to their governess. The children usually give hard time to the governess.

The children in Dame Ivy's novels, especially the little ones, are a source of happiness. They bring in an air of liveliness. Ivy Compton-Burnett creates them in a very natural way. She has created a lively world of children.

The children are real critics in her novels. The wisest things come from the mouths of children to the surprise of everyone. They are good observers and are daring enough to offer their comments even before the family tyrants. Marriage is looked at as:

Gavin says to Ridley :

"But you can't be mother's real husband," But a woman can't have more than one husband in a civilized land. It is only in savage countries that they do that. And then it is usually more than one wife."<sup>18</sup>

Children talk to their mother freely. They are inquiring about her marriage and children.

" Will you have any more children ?" said Gavin,  
" No, I Don't think so," said Eleanor.  
" Why don't you?"  
" well, People don't generally have more than nine."  
" Queen Anne had eighteen."  
" Yes, but I am not a queen."  
"Do queens have more than other people?"

"It seems sometimes as if they do," said Eleanor."<sup>19</sup>

This comic and humorous conversation is really a satirical and critical comment on family system of victorian Era.

Everyone wants pleasures and happiness if life is hard. Then one wants to free himself of herself from it. This is true about Eleanor. She wants to have her own house. She wants to get rid of the burdening family responsibilities.

Eleanor explains her stand in marrying Ridley as :

"I have felt myself unfit to be alone with my burden. I have never had faith in myself as a mother. My children will not suffer from not having me in their home. I wish in a way that they would. And I shall be at their service. I see no good in postponing a change that is resolved upon and I am not troubled about making it so soon. I am marrying in distrust of myself in despair at my loneliness, and in gratitude for a feeling that met my need. I was not in a position to reject it."<sup>20</sup>

The role of Ridley, Fulbert and Eleanor can be summed up in Daniel's words. "The chief actor must bear the heaviest part."<sup>21</sup>

Ridley sends a letter of admiration. He expresses his love for her. She keeps the letter to herself. It becomes a cause of suspicion for Regan, Mother-in-law. The revelation comes at the end of the novel. There is a family re-union. There is some sort of relief for Sir Jesse and Eleanor. Eleanor accepts Fulbert as husband without hesitation. The tragic event is averted. The Marlowes get their father and they come to know about their parentage. The darker times are exposed by Photographs; and some characters are saved from the sense of loneliness. Differences are cleared, and there is a family re-union.

In this novel, Ivy Compton-Burnett has depicted the relationship between parents and children. She has thrown light on the economic position of the upper middle class family and its problems.

Money is the factor deciding almost all relationships in the family. The person like Fulbert has to leave his family and wife behind and go to South America. It leads to the separation between husband and wife. It creates uncertainty for children. The friend like Ridley yields to motives and he becomes a cause of melo-drama. There are letters, telegrams and Photographs disclosing the real

identity and of the sinners. The sinners like Ridely and sir Jesse are found out. They are exposed. They become the cause of family tragedy. The Lady Jesse Grandma and children are sufferers.

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