

## CHAPTER II

### ***MEN AND WIVES***

The Nineteenth Century, in England was the great age of unhappy families. Families lacked cordial relationships. The society consisted of problem children. There were incestuous, crude, old tyrants in the families. The society was full of half-brothers and half-sisters, step-mothers and step-fathers. It was the age of family dissensions. Hence the theme of family tyranny cropped up during the Georgian era. Ivy Compton-Burnett chose the same theme for her novels. But she gave her own treatment to this theme. She depicted tense family relations in her works.

Ivy Compton-Burnett, the writer of the *Pasters and Masters* (1925) spent fourteen years in silence. She observed and studied closely the life and society around her. Before *Men and Wives* (1931) she had written two works- *Dolores* (1911), *Brothers and Sisters* (1929).

The novel *Men and Wives*(1931) is a representative work showing growing prosperity of the middle classes and also their growing problems. The prosperity made the parents less caring for their

children. On the whole, the family life was less formidable. The themes like freedom of women and their own status in the society get reflected in Ivy Compton-Burnett's various works. The decline of religion and frustration followed have also contributed to the themes of her novels. The novel *Men and Wives* touches all such problems.

The novel *Men and Wives*(1931) is about the central figure Lady Harriet Haslam. Lady Harriet, Sir Godfrey's wife, dominates all the scenes in her life as well as in the novel. She is a family tyrant. She wants to keep everyone and everything in her grip. Even her husband is ruled by her. She looks into the family accounts. She plans everything. She wishes that everything should go according to her desire. It, therefore, makes her restless. She spends sleepless nights. She becomes envious of others. Even her daughter, Griselada, experiences the envy, when she asks:

"Mother how did you sleep?"  
"Not at all, my sweet one.  
Never mind as long as you  
slept well."<sup>1</sup>

Lady Harriet has three sons and a daughter. She receives their sympathy and love. But she is not satisfied, when she feels that they do not love her

sufficiently she makes a fake attempt of suicide. She wants to frighten her family members. Later on she is sent to a mental hospital to regain her normal self.

When she goes away from her family she starts worrying about her family. But in her absence the family makes progress. The family members get self-contentment and freedom. They arrange parties. Even charities are given. They try to fulfil their desires in her absence. When she returns home, she becomes upset to find everything going smooth even in her absence. Lady Harriet tries to get the former hold on all the members of the family.

Her eldest son, Matthew, is against her wish. He knows her opposition to his marriage with Camilla. So he mixes up a poisonous tablet with Lady Harriets sleeping tablets. He causes her death. It results into Camilla's refusal to marry him. She calls him a murderer. The guilt conscience makes Matthew confess his guilt to his own family members and to the family members of Camilla. But his family members treat it fake. They decide it as his mental delusion.

Lady Harriet, on the death bed, leaves her fortune to her husband on conditions. She expects

her husband to remain her widower. It seems that even after her death she wants to rule over everybody's wishes and desires. It is the tyrant's exercise of power which creates a tension and a family tie is disturbed. The character of Lady Harriet gets same personal shade. She is portrayed as a tyrant. Camilla remarks : "She is a high-minded old tyrant" <sup>2</sup>

Ivy Compton-Burnett was herself a victim of family tyranny. Her maternal grandfather was a tyrant. In her later life she herself became, to some extent, a tyrant. As Cicely Greig says :

"It all seems to be inevitable and the good and gentler submits once more to the tyrant and there is always a tyrant in Ivy's novels. We find tyrants in the novel *Men and Wives*." <sup>3</sup>

The novel depicts the tightly -knit family relations. But these family relations create tension. Lady Harriet Haslam wants to fulfil her ambitions. She expects that Matthew should abide by her orders. But Matthew feels Suppressed. So, he takes a drastic decision, and for sake of his love he kills his own mother. Lady Harriet wants Matthew to practise medicine in London. It is her ambition that

her second son, Jermyn, should acquire degree at Cambridge. But neither of them fulfils her wishes. As a result neither of them finds favours of mother. Lady Harriet doesn't have good opinion about Matthew's beloved, Camilla. The atmosphere of Lady Harriet's family is not cordial. She is a woman of bitter mood. She always threatens the peace of family for her own whims. Her behaviour seems irrational. Matthew feels that he should not alter his life for the whims of one woman.

Sir Godfrey is the husband of Lady Harriet. He always feels nervous in presence of his wife. He always goes on talking to please her. His every act tries to please her. Sir Godfrey praises Lady Harriet while talking to his son:

"Your mother is wonderful woman, and has made up her mind to cease throwing blight to a tone us for what she has made a suffer. Ah! if there is anyone who appreciates your mother, it is I; If there is anyone whose bitterness is swallowed up in admiration, it is I, it is mine. It is I."<sup>4</sup>

Once Sir Godfrey tries to plead for Matthew. Lady Harriet, then, reacts very strangely. She leaves the room abruptly, and goes to the family doctor, Antony, for some tablets to commit

suicide. While the party is going on in her home she tries to commit suicide. Thus the peace of family is disturbed again. Her speech from death-bed is pungent as she says:

“I would have had nothing changed in anyone of you, no word you have said to me, no look you have given me, no action you have taken for my sake, or in spite of me.”<sup>5</sup>

The doctor declares that she is out of danger. But Harriet feels humiliated and shocked. She is hospitalized for six months to regain her mental balance. After returning to her family again she wants to take back the regain of her family in her hands. She wants to control everything. Matthew is bent upon marrying Camilla, whereas Grieselda, her daughter, is going to marry Bellamy, the divorced husband of Camilla. Harriet feels disturbed again Jermyn's book of poem is published at the cost of the family income. Lady Harriet feels that everyone is leading and living a carefree life. She does not like even to talk to them. When her friend, Rachel, comes into her room, she throws herself into his arms and breaks into tears. She cries because she has come to know that her husband and children can live without her. She realizes that she has lost

a place in the family. All her life she has lived like a tyrant. But in the end she feels humiliated she desires to regain her power. But she is not sure to get it. So, she is frustrated. When she tries to tighten her hold and grip over all the men and matters in the family, Matthew opposes. He begins to feel that his mother is an obstacle for his marriage. So he takes a decision to kill her. He thinks that the things will come to right track after her death. But it does not happen.

*Men and Wives* is fine example of family tyranny. Lady Harriet is a symbol of horror and sadism. The abnormal behaviour of Harriet is the cause of the destruction of family peace and relations. She has weak nerves when the family's economy is at the brink of ruin, Lady Harriet wants to control it.

In the novel, *Men and Wives*, Ivy's focus is on 'family'. There is a conflict between the social expectation attached to a role and the self-interested individual. Lady Harriet seems to be eccentric responsible for the conflicts between two generations. There are some characters under the shock of family greed and they are always under the strain of maintaining good relations with other members.

The novel *Men and Wives* is a family chronicle. It depicts the upper middle class family. There are descriptions in detail of servants, houses, school-rooms and nurseries as well as the children with their group affinities and teachers and governesses. Some of the situations and incidents have reflection of Ivy's childhood life. Her personal life and experience is transformed into fictional life. There are characters like step-mother and a step-father as well as a half-brother and a half-sister. The scenes between the governesses and children spring out of her personal experiences. Ivy had a step-mother. She was a woman of sharp temper. The brother and sister relationship is also her personal experience.

The action of this novel takes place presumably some where between 1890 to 1910. So, the upper middle class family depicted in the novel belongs to late Victorian age and the Georgian period. In this novel Ivy Compton-Burnett points the chill and cold family atmosphere. It reminds us about her own life.

The family of Lady Harriet is a large family. It has a large spacious garden. The members of this family some times go there for a walk. It is



the upper middle class family of late Victorian era. Ivy herself knew the intricacies of the upper middle class family problems she herself belonged to the upper middle class family.

Lady Harriet's family is materialistic, she has a lust for power. Her bond with the family compels her to live in the family. This bond rules the heart in the family. It brings misery and dependence with it. It has unbreakable knot with crimes. A house or family is a complicated organism. It needs understanding. There are temptations in the way of some characters. They are tested by these temptations and their inner life and nature are revealed.

The world created by Ivy Compton-Burnett is unique. There is nothing unusual. Miss Ivy herself says about her world-

"It isn't like anyone else's, one perhaps unconsciously makes a world gradually by writing always in the same way...."<sup>6</sup>

This novel has a blending of pathos and humour. The upper middle class family and its problems are exposed ironically and humourously. Lady Harriet has two claims to power-one-her high idealism and another is her nervous sickness. She has

sensitiveness superior to that of other characters. She wants to use it to solve the crisis and problems of her family. She wants to control the purse string of the family. This novel represents the real life of English society. As Robert Liddle says-

“And they may come to seem novels of English life between 1888 and 1910 which might have been written at any time.”<sup>7</sup>

In Ivy's novels her families live in country houses. Her own childhood was spent in 'Hove'. Her own experience is reflected in this novel. In her family structure there are innumerable grand-children, and grand-fathers, grand-mothers and parents, students and teachers, servants and butlers as well as brothers and sisters, guests and other relatives. Ivy's world is interesting with various family structures. The characters in the novel belong to various professions. There are religious people as well as sceptic people. There are hypocritic and wicked characters. There are lawyers and doctors. There are tyrants, victims and murderers. Ivy has interwoven her plot with the relationships among these varied characters. Such varied relationships are provided by the family structure. She says :

'A family is a microcosm, it provides a readymade, generally accepted set of human relationships, power situations, affection and enmities.'<sup>8</sup>

The family life and structure depicted by her is complex one. Rarely wedding bells are heard to words the end of her novels. Her novel is not comic but it is melo-dramatic and tragic. She presents human foibles and wickedness.

According to Ivy Compton-Burnett there should be a judicious tolerance about the frailties in the families. Every victorian family life was full of tensions. There was the phenomenon of power and possession. It over shadowed eithics and morality.

Ivy Compton-Burnett is one of the most accomplished English women noelists of the mid twentieth century. The location of action and time of action is the late victorian as well as Edwardian England. The action and events take place in a large country house. It is inhabited by two to three generations of the minor squirearchy. The family is financially not prospering. The family relationship are exposed to the shock waves set up by sudden death or committed murder or suicide. The family which is in this novel is invulnerable, indestructible, unit. The

family of three generations goes hand in hand upon its appointed road.

There is another relationship between the two types-the tyrant who exploits and the other one who submits. In the late victorian age of England, such relationship was a part and parcel of family structure. Ivy Compton-Burnett herself was a victim of her mother, Katherine Rees, who was a beautiful woman with golden hair. Ivy was suppressed by Katherine. Ivy had a great bond with her brothers, Guy and Noel. She loved them, but because of the mother she had to suppressed her feelings and love. Tyranny and suppression are the inseparable parts of Ivy's works.

The conflict between the moral code and human behaviour is very well depicted by her in this novel. In this large family of middle class. It is difficult to manage everything. So, the central character becomes a tyrant. Matthew decides to kill his mother for his selfish purpose. So, there is no moral code observed. Everything goes on according to the deep-rooted motives and selfishness.

One of the themes of this novel is self-sacrifice. Self-sacrifice is very necessary to maintain family peace and bond. Even the children are aware

of it. But when Lady Harriet's children question , Mr. Dominic Spong, the lawyer about his view. They are shocked by his answer :

"Isn't it very dreadful to see sacrifice of self?" said Griselda.

"Miss Griselda, sometimes very beautiful," said Dominic Spong.<sup>9</sup>

The different kinds of relationship in the family are reflected in this novel. Even the relation between a son and a mother remained doubtful. The following dialogue between the two maids- Agatha and Kate- reflects on this issue.

"Our feelings must depend on the truth of course," said Kate.

"There must have been a strange relationship between him and his mother," said Agatha, a relationship that no simply natural mother, certainly not myself could understand"<sup>10</sup>

Mr. Bellamy is a clergyman. He is the husband of Camilla. Now he wants to divorce her and wants to get married with Griselda. It is an indication of his being not happy in his first marriage. Camilla, too, wants to marry Matthew. It shows also that she is not happy with her first

husband. Mr. Bellamy is less a clergyman and more a play-wright and actor. Though he works for church, he is not religious. He considers himself a weak man. Hence he is expecting a strong woman as his wife. He feels that Griselda is strong enough to be his wife.

Ivy Compton-Burnett throws light on the betrayals in family life. As Robert Liddell says :

"In the bizarre theological simplicity of the Compton-Burnett world the civilized carry their primitive hells about with them."<sup>11</sup>

This remark is true about Matthew. He carries with him the primitive hell of selfishness. For sake of Camilla he kills his mother. This is the example of mutual tormenting. It is an example of tyranny and cruelty.

Mr. Dominic Spong is another representative of the upper middle class. He does not like to remain widower after the death of his wife. Immediately after her burial he is ready to get married.

The complex nature of families is described by Agatha. According to her the young families are the most complex, the most significant,

the most deep rooted in the world. The feeble relationship between two sexes is ridiculed by Agatha:

“That people who have had the great experience of coming to setter and showing the first deep events of married life can break it all up as if it were a trivial passing relationship”

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The victorian society consisted of a large number of spinsters. Ivy Compton-Burnett herself was unmarried. Therefore, she is sympathetic for them. Rachel remarks:

“Of course I see how civilized it is to be I spinster. I should not think that savage countries have spinster....I never know why marriage goes on in civilized countries.”<sup>13</sup>

Miss Ivy Compton-Burnett is aware of the poor position of spinsters in society. After the first world war spinsterhood became an unavoidable feature of the society. Her novels are full of spinsters. She complains that women are not regarded equal to men, both in their strength and in their intelligence. Even the women do not consider themselves equal to men. They are always given

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secondary position in society. They are looked down upon by people. Bellamy suggests a golden mean:

"I am not suggesting that we should not appreciate women, but that we should not look down on them."<sup>14</sup>

After the death of the central figure of the family a testing period for the family begins. Death and funerals are looked at from various angles in the novel. For Bellamy, Camilla's husband, death is freedom. According to him funerals are better than weddings.

He says-

"The funerals are the best, they do get rid of somebody. We emerge from them with one Parishioner less. They are better than the weddings, which promise us a further supply. Funerals have never failed us"<sup>15</sup>

About married life and single life, Ivy Compton-Burnett's comments are really speaking. In *Men and Wives* We find spinsters or unmarried persons as well as married couples. But none married person seems to be contented. In this connection, Rachel's ironical comment seems to be significant. She asks her mother: Your happiest years were your single ones"<sup>16</sup>



The society and the family reflected in Ivy Compton-Burnett's novel are materialistic. It is an affluent and bourgeois family. In this family only the shrewd and the rich survive by their power of manipulations. But some characters never hesitate to commit crime for self interest and greed. About her rise of family tyrants and criminals. Ivy says-

"Many a times a good many of us, if subjected to a strong and sudden temptation, without any risk of being found out, would yield to it."<sup>17</sup>

The tensionful relationship among the characters is revealed through the dialogues. The following conversation of Sir Godfrey with the doctor reveals though apparently he praises her that he doesn't love his wife Lady Harriet

" No, no, Doctor," said Godfrey, " We will not keep you to that, you must not promise more than the most. You will not raise our hopes to dash them, we know you too well, we do not ask impossibilities even of you. That would be a risk we must not take. We do not blame you for the inevitability of that; it is not indeed to be set to your account. We do not forget ourselves, to grasp at the completion of our own life at the cost of hers, I speak for my children and myself. We will leave her where she is,

watched over, contented,  
safe"<sup>18</sup>

Ivy Compton-Burnett is not interested in religion although she had religious background. In her novels she doesn't discuss religion largely. She used to go to a High-church school, She had a lot of High-church lessons. But she was influenced by the advancement of science and other developments. So the religion which is depicted in her novels is superficial. In her novels there are scenes in which many characters attended churches on Sunday. They also conduct prayers at breakfast tables. Even the servants in the family attend the prayers. The children are shown attending churches. Many a times the Prayers are only verbose. Sometimes the prayers are made under the nervous tensions. Even in the churches the children feel the stern eye of the family tyrant. They are conscious of their shabby dresses.

The world and family life depicted by Ivy Compton-Burnett is a quiet different world. It is a 'narrow and careful world'<sup>19</sup>

*Lady Harriets 'deeper sinking into selfish bitterness'* <sup>20</sup> is criticized by Matthew. It shows

senseless behaviour of mother. Matthew reacts vehemently on his mother's selfishness;

"We shall not alter our lives and our aims for the whims of one woman. you may have your opinion. we have ours.... But if you do not pull yourself up in time, you will find yourself one day a very lonely old woman"<sup>21</sup>

At the end of the novel there are tributes paid to Lady Harriet, sir Godfrey's tribute is 'a most fitting tribute' Paid to his wife. He expresses his satisfaction:

"What amuses me," said Godfrey. "Well, I don't mean it amuses me," What I take satisfaction in, is that Harriet has had everything turn out as she wished. Matthew is off to London to pursue his profession, and Jermyn, to Cambridge for the same sort of thing and Griselda is quite of her person and Gregory of the old dames and I myself am laid up high and dry!<sup>22</sup>

Sir Godfrey once says to Lady Harriet about the relationship between parents and children:

"You must not say things to the children that hit and hurt them," Their parents duty is to cheer and believe in them. That is their mother's part."<sup>23</sup>

Due to tension, Lady Harriet spends sleepless nights. But she desires to utilize this 'future' for her own benefits. She doesn't like her husband referring to her sleeplessness, She reacts :

"You know I do not sleep in these days, Godfrey. It is monotonous for you always to ask the question, and for me always to answer it."<sup>24</sup>

There are tea-parties, breakfasts, and prayers family members, guests and relations come together. The gathering consist of persons like Sir Perey, Mrs Christy, Buttermere, Mrs. Calkin, Miss Dabis and Miss Kate. It is full of butlers, servants, governesses,, teachers, cooks. But the youngsters hate such parties. Gerldine once says- "We felt quiet embarrassed by coming in group of widows and spinsters."<sup>25</sup>

The society of Ivy Compton- Burnett family limits itself to the cell of its members and friends. There is no change and growth in their nature. There is no mental alterations in them. The economical, social and circumstantial conditions which influence the life at large do not change there character in her novels. Ivy explains the cause :

"The action of my books on the whole covers a short-time, so, that it is hardly

possible for a character to grow. It takes a long time for a human being to change."<sup>26</sup>

About Ivy Compton-Burnett's characters

Bernard McCabe says that-

"Her enjoyment in her characters spills over all her novels. She magnifies their faults and virtues and never pronounces a judgement. Nothing is checked and none punished "<sup>27</sup>

The end of this novel is a melo-dramatic. The story of the tyrant Lady Harriet ends with her death. But the lust for power never dies. Her will-paper shows that there is no end of tyrant. There is no poetic justice. Lady Harriet Haslam is punished for her tyranny by her son, who murders her by poisoning her. But the killer doesn't become a hero. He is also a tyrant. He is also punished. He is rejected by Camilla for marriage. The novel doesn't end with wedding bells. On the contrary, there is the death of the central figure and the head of the family.

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