Feminism began as a social movement in the late eighteenth century to achieve political equality for women. Over the years it has touched upon so many diverse disciplines and systems of thought that it has become difficult to confine it within a unified single approach/theory. Having gone through various phases with demands of equality and protests against the subordination by men, feminism has touched almost all aspects of our lives be it social, political, economic, literary or sexual. Analysis of women’s role and position from these different perspectives gave way to a number of theories of feminism and rendered it divided and fractured. It gave a setback to its political activism and resulted in ‘backlash’ or the post-feminism. Yet, this multiplicity of approach and division based on a number of factors has given unlimited scope to the feminist discourse.

Modern feminism began with Mary Wollstonecraft who, inspired by the ideals of French Revolution and Liberalism, argued in her book *A Vindication for the Rights of Women (1798)* for the need to make women rationally educated. Although she did not advocate their leaving the domestic sphere, she demanded girls education to open them to the possibility of economic independence and to give them freedom and dignity. Similarly, J.S. Mill in his book *The Subjection of Women* (1869) tackled the problem of women’s oppression and blamed the legal subordination of women to men and suggested the equality of rights to women for human improvement. The demand for giving women the right to vote, raised from 1830s onwards, was ultimately met by 1920s in most of the western European countries and North America. In the history of feminism this first wave
is best remembered for the suffragette movement though campaign by women for many more specific reforms related to matrimonial law, property ownership, child custody rights, work and educational opportunities and government regulation of morality accompanied the main demand for women’s suffrage. In America, the political struggle for women’s rights started with the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention. After that a number of pro-suffrage groups consolidated and renewed their efforts towards achieving the right to vote. In 1923, the Woman’s Party demanded the Equal Rights Amendment to remove all legal distinctions between the sexes but it proved to be a long battle as this demand was not granted till the second wave of feminism from 1960s onwards in America.

In the interim between these two waves of feminism, two famous works, *A Room of One’s Own (1929)* by Virginia Woolf and *The Second Sex (1949)* by Simone de Beauvoir again raised the issue of women’s rights and freedom from male dominance in social, economic and literary context. Both of these seminal works had a lasting influence on the feminist movement.

Virginia Woolf, regarded as a pioneer of feminist literary criticism, in her landmark publication *A Room of one’s own* questions the necessity of seeing the world from the male point of view; economic politics in a male-dominated world where women are often financially dependent on males; absence of women from the history of mankind; and also the failure of ‘male’ language in expressing the essentially female experiences of women writers.

Dealing with issues which remain significant to feminists till today, Woolf claimed that women must have financial and psychological independence to realize their creative potential. She finds the glorified and romanticized image of women in poetry
“completely insignificant” (43) in real life. Woolf stresses upon the need of rewriting the history so as to give a due and accurate representation to women.

Demanding a female literary tradition, Woolf emphasises the need to bring out the neglected and forgotten female writers of the past and encourage the new ones to speak their heart out in their own distinctive style. She strongly feels that female authors, burdened with a conventional (male) legacy of thought, form and style, fail to evolve their essentially female perspective and style. They have often expressed themselves according to the standards of literary tradition/canon established by men. The ‘male’ language fails to express the female heart and mind. Calling on women to write as women, Woolf says that they must create a language that will grasp the rhythms of their own experience and a literary form that is “adapted to the body” (78).

Setting the tone for contemporary feminism with her famous statement, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman”, Simone de Beauvoir took a leap forward and beyond the women’s limited demand for civil rights and educational opportunities raised during the first wave of feminism. Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, a bold treatise on woman’s inferior position in society, inspired much of the theoretical work of the 1970s, and also became central to subsequent inquiries into feminist politics. It also became fundamental to a number of social and political interrogation into the sexual division of labour, women’s health, familial relations and popular culture. She presented an epic account of gender-discrimination, tracing it long back to history, with a detailed analyses of biological, psychological, historical and cultural explanations for giving women the ‘other’, inferior and secondary status.
Rejecting the notion of ‘feminine nature’ as myth and biological differences insufficient to provide a causal explanation for women’s oppression, de Beauvoir challenges the hierarchical division of men and women into the first and second sex. With the tool of existentialism, Beauvoir digs deeper into the human history and finds that just as each conscious being in a struggle for recognition accepts the self as the essential subject and others as inessential, the same is true of man and woman. The man is always the essential, the ‘I’ and the woman is always the inessential, the ‘other’ to man. The same belief is central to the work of Sigmund Frued whose theory of sexuality is based on the possession of phallus/penis. A woman lacks the phallus so she is a negative and subjective. Beauvoir extends this inquiry into this lack of female self to art and literature where women are depicted as objects of men’s desires and fears i.e. either as virgins or whores but never as complex autonomous individuals and are always associated with the passive body and men with the active mind.

Criticising the institution of marriage as oppressive and economically exploitative, she refutes the belief that woman is happy as long as she is provided for by her male partner. She analyses the position of woman from the point of view of liberty and finds that her liberty is limited, and defined and granted her by someone else. Beauvoir observes that the woman produces the next generation and this contribution is purely biological and thereby immanent while man transcends the purely biological through philosophy, art and science and shapes the future. Beauvoir forms her vision of ‘the modern woman’ emancipated through technology and equal to man.

The significance of Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* continues till today although many of its ideas have since been criticised or even rejected. Many class and race-
conscious feminists have accused her of misplaced universalism and ignoring the differences among women based on a number of factors. Combining the vision of a progressive society as expressed by the first wave feminism and the issues of sex and gender which was to be pursued vehemently by the second wave feminism, de Beauvoir linked the two waves of feminism in *The Second Sex*.

Betty Friedan’s 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique* renewed the struggle of the first wave which had culminated in female suffrage more than forty years back. Arguing for full political and legal equality for women, Friedan exhorted housewives to overcome their frustration and psychological distress caused by their private and domestic entrapment by pursuing public careers and achieve maturity, identity and completeness of self. Friedan also identified the negative influence of psychoanalysis of Freud, the anthropology of Margaret Mead and the gender-orientation of educational system. Rejecting these mutually reinforcing systems that prescribe woman’s biology as her destiny, Friedan advocated for access to higher education, equal rights in family and law. Friedan’s views, founded upon the principles of liberalism and rooted firmly within a liberal feminist tradition, presuppose that social and legal equality within the existing social structures are sufficient to secure freedom. All that was needed, according to Friedan, was women’s full participation in the (American) society which already espoused the goal of individual fulfilment.

Liberal Feminist theory was extensively critiqued by feminist scholars. Mere legal equality, they argued, was insufficient to remove the age-old imbalance between men and women. They felt that liberal feminists showed unwillingness to dismantle the male-oriented social system and confront the patriarchal bias of capitalism itself. Criticising the
liberal emphasis on nature, natural rights and self-evident truths suggesting biological essentialisms that leads to a distinction between the public masculine world and the private feminine world, the feminist critics identified deep structural causes of women’s oppression, left untouched by liberal feminist theory.

Another feminist theory that developed during the second wave of feminist movement is Marxist/Socialist feminism. Going a step further than Frederick Engels who explained in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1845) that women’s oppression began with the advent of private property in human society, Juliet Mitchell in *Woman’s Estate* (1971) pointed out that capitalism and patriarchy both oppress women. Critical of Marxist/Socialist theory that sees women’s liberation as merely an adjunct to class analysis, Mitchell recommends transformation of all the four structures ruling woman’s life: production, reproduction, sexuality and the socialization of children. Nancy Hartsock too, like Mitchell, attacked capitalism and patriarchy both and argued for a restructuring of the social relations:

Since we do not act to produce and reproduce our lives in a vacuum, changed consciousness and changed definitions of the self can only occur in conjunction with a restructuring of the social (both societal and personal) relations in which each of us is involved. (61)

Socialist feminism represented not only female oppression but the entire oppressive patriarchal power structure by exposing relationships of male domination as unnatural especially in their relation to capitalist modes of production.

Another Marxist/Socialist feminist Sheila Rowbotham too argued for both, a revolution in consciousness and a historical analysis of women’s oppression within
capitalism. In her analysis of relations between Marxism and Feminism, Rowbotham examined the role of family in maintaining capitalism as well as the nature of women’s work within the family. She stressed that the principal task for women today is to transform the whole cultural conditioning of women and to raise their consciousness. According to Rowbotham’s perception of the problem, “the woman question is not comprehensible except in terms of the total process of a complete series of repressive structure”. She insists, “In order to comprehend this, it is necessary to replace a mechanical model of social change (base/superstructure) by a complex and interrelated self-regulating revolutionary model” (Wandor 1978, 26-27). Revolution will involve creation of a new consciousness on the one hand, and fundamental material change on the other. Revolution needs the particular experience of women and the resultant feminist consciousness as much as any other thing. “Such a leap in consciousness would shatter whole layers of comfortable paternal authoritarian assumptions within the revolutionary movement”, thus the need for “breaking the silence” of women forms the core of Rowbotham’s analysis (qtd. in Bhagwat, 331).

Zillah Eisenstein, another prominent socialist feminist explores the relations of patriarchy and capitalism in her book *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism (1979)*. She defines the term ‘Capitalist Patriarchy’ as description of the “mutually reinforcing dialectical relationship between capitalist class structure and hierarchical sexual structuring” (5). Using Marx’s theory of alienation for the analysis of women’s condition under capitalist patriarchy, Eisenstein asserts, as summarised by Madsen:
The alienated forms of social experience that are allowed under capitalism are further constrained for women by patriarchy which places further restrictions upon the realisation of individual essence or creative possibilities. Thus, the dismantling of the class system in insufficient to liberate women into the free experience of their own creative potentiality. (194)

The task of socialist feminism, according to Eisenstein, is the reappraisal of class relations in a feminine context: “We must redefine the categories themselves. We need to define classes in terms of woman’s complex reality and her consciousness of that reality” (31). Socialist feminist analysis aims to investigate the specific circumstances of women in society at particular historical moments influenced by relations of power and defined by ideology.

Liberal feminism and Marxist/Socialist feminism both confined their analysis of women’s oppression to the objective structures of society. Widening the scope of their analysis, radical, psychoanalytic and postmodern feminism looked beyond the legal, political and economic structures of society to explore how the meaning of gender is created and perpetuated in all aspects of society. Moreover, radical feminism unlike liberal and Marxist feminism which emphasised equality with men, focused more on difference from men.

In 1970s feminists associated with radical feminism concentrated on the analysis of women’s role in reproduction and the practices surrounding mothering, sexuality and the definition of gender roles leading to a ‘sex class’ and their subordination to men. Rejecting the biological basis of women’s subordination and oppression, radical feminists blamed the cultural construction of mothering and sexuality. Treating gender as a system
leading to women’s oppression, the radical feminists emphasised that the sexual oppression of women underlay the economic, cultural and social subordination of women.

Shulamith Firestone in her book *The Dialectic of Sex (1970)* presented an analysis of the ‘sex class’ from the theoretical perspectives of Marx, Engels and Freud. She contented that the reproductive differences between the sexes led to the first division of labour and subsequently to all further division into economic and cultural classes. Rejecting the theory that female biology dictates women’s destiny, Firestone pointed out that discrimination based on ‘natural origins’ could not be justified. She suggested two remedies for the oppression: first, fertility control and artificial reproduction which may lead to the transformation of family relation and secondly, use of machines to effect a change in human relation to work and economic relation.

Many other radical feminists though rejected Firestone’s suggestions, yet they agreed with her perception that the oppression of women basically arises from causes that are fundamentally biological, and so women are oppressed through their sexuality. Some of them suggested that instead of abandoning motherhood, women should take over the whole process of production and free it from the powers of patriarchy. Adrienne Rich, for instance, supported the positive role of mothering and held the essentialist position which stresses the need to accept mothering as a positive and life-affirming activity.

Another radical feminist who influenced the second wave was Kate Millett whose controversial book *Sexual Politics* appeared in 1970. The book encouraged the idea that a feminist movement, primarily concerned with the abolition of male supremacy in both its social and personal manifestations was needed. Giving a systematic overview of
patriarchy as a political institution centred upon the concept of sexual domination of females by males, Millett argues that patriarchy is the primary form of human oppression maintained principally through ideological control. Rejecting the biological base for male supremacy, Millett equates sexual politics with the politics of patriarchy. Millett uses politics and power as interchangeable terms and argues that male supremacy presents itself as a natural or biological phenomena though, it is socially enforced through ideological conditioning, socialisation of early childhood, restriction of women to the family, male monopoly of physical violence and other institutions. Millett too, like de Beauvoir, strongly believed that patriarchy through its different means artificially constructed the idea of the feminine i.e., inferiority which is internalised by women until it gets psychologically rooted.

To explore and expose the working of ‘sexual politics’ further, Millett presented an in-depth analysis of some twentieth century authors like D.H. Lawrence, Norman Mailer and Henry Miller. Millett’s persuasive analysis highlighted in their writings a pattern of masculine dominance and feminine submission that Millett identified as misogyny. With a purpose to show how women are placed culturally within a scheme of male values, Millett exposed the celebration of the patriarchal prejudice and sexual violence in their texts. Thus, Millett initiated a mode of feminist analysis which offered a new way of reading a text and question its sex bias.

Judith Fetterley in her book *The Resisting Reader* (1976) also aimed to create ‘a female reader’ who could analyse the political and literary assumptions of a text and question the ‘universal’ values distorting the truth in favour of male interests. Explaining how women have always been made to adopt a male perspective on femaleness that
emphasises their powerlessness in front of the male establishment, she says, “As readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny” (1978, xx). Refusing to accept her conditioning into patriarchal society, the female reader, she suggested, should reject and expose the sex-bias of a text.

Another radical feminist Andrea Dworkin in her book *Right-wing Women: The Politics of Domesticated Females* (1978) dealt with the case of radically male-identified women who conform and assimilate to patriarchal value structure for survival. Numerous patriarchal strategies such as “rape, wife beating, forced childbearing, medical butchering, sex-motivated murder, sadistic psychological abuse” (20) are employed to keep them passive and subordinated. The fear of punishment and male violence makes these women displace their own anger against their male abusers on to “those far away, foreign, or different” (34). Dworkin suggests that the role of radical feminism is to struggle for both “individual and collective survival that is not based on self-loathing, fear, and humiliation, but instead on self-determination, dignity and authentic identity” (35).

Arguing against Christianity in her book *Beyond God The Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (1973), Mary Daly, another radical feminist described it as essentially a patriarchal institution used for the oppression of women and suggested the term ‘metapatriarchal’ in her later book *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978) to signify the entire transformation of the female subject that has been created by patriarchy. To resist and move beyond ‘patriarchal mind manipulation’, Daly
argued for a new woman-centred language which could uproot the patriarchal language that embodied and expressed a male-centred worldview and supplant it with a feminine version of language.

Connecting radical feminism with lesbian feminist theory is the shared understanding that women are oppressed through their sexuality, whether straight or gay. Critical of the ideology of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ used for the control of feminine sexuality, radical lesbian theorists propose, as summarised by Deborah L. Madsen, “the feminist revaluation of lesbian sensibility and sexuality, the reversal of anti-female masculine myths, and the reconstruction of language and belief systems that have been corrupted by patriarchy, substituting for these misogynistic institutions alternative discourses derived from women’s history and culture” (156).

During the second wave of feminism an alternative female-centred criticism termed as ‘gynocriticism’ developed to address the need to establish an alternative female tradition of writing which had been suppressed by the established male literary tradition. An American academic Elaine Showalter, in her book A Literature of their Own (1977), attempted to revolutionize the accepted canon and questioned “the artificiality and subjectivity of the seemingly objective value judgements that surrounded literary analysis” (Tolan 328). She argued that women writers should be read differently because they wrote differently from men. She rejected the traditional critical methods and assumptions in favour of a gender-specific analysis of women’s writing. Creating a new appetite for women’s literature, Showalter emphasised on female experience as it was reflected in literature by women. She tried to create an awareness and sensitivity to latent meaning in women’s writing and go beyond the surface of the text to explore its full
potential for meaning. She was criticised for creating a parallel female canon and generalizing female experience. Her critics felt that the very ideas of a literary tradition and canon formation were masculine, and she was continuing the male tradition of sex-differentiation instead of freeing women from such reductive analysis.

Working in contrast to gynocriticism, French feminism refused to accept the premises on which canon formation was based and deconstructed gender in a revolutionary way. The early second wave feminists, including de Beavoir, Millett and Greer were extremely critical of Freud for perpetuating sexual difference and reinforcing the inferiority of the female. But in 1974 Juliet Mitchell drew attention to the useful aspects of Freud’s theories in her text *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* and argued for the use of Freud’s psychoanalysis and his theory of gender differentiation to study and analyse the culturally instilled gender differentiation.

Building upon Frued’s theory of the Oedipal stage of psychosexual development, Carol Gilligan in *In a Different Voice* (1982) asserted that female pre-Oedipal attachment to the mother is interpreted as the basic cause of women’s developmental failure. Pointing the masculine bias in psychological accounts of human development, Gilligan objects to the representation of the development of male identity and moral values as universal and objective while feminine experience is presented as marked by emotional and physical weakness, confusion, self-doubt and uncertain judgements. Gilligan asserts that these qualities should not be seen as signs of weakness. Presenting a different perspective she says, “Sensitivity to the needs of others and the assumption of responsibility for taking care lead women to attend to voices other than their own and to include in their judgement other points of view” (16). So rather than a sign of moral
weakness, Gilligan argues, these qualities have moral strength. Differentiating between a masculine ‘morality of rights’ and a feminine ‘morality of responsibility’ Gilligan objects to the psychological evaluation of these distinct moral voices and finds them loaded heavily in favour of the masculine (23). Thus, challenging one of the founding assumptions of western tradition, Gilligan valorizes the ‘difference’ in women.

Inspired by Freud’s idea that gender identity is formed by social influence and not pre-determined, and achieved through Oedipal phase, feminists turned their attention to the pre-Oedipal period marked by the presence of the omnipotent mother. Lesbian feminists emphasised that for both men and women the primary love object was female, while spiritual feminists identified in pre-Oedipal stage a natural connection and identification with a mother/goddess figure. The anti-essentialist feminists consolidated their position by pointing out the sexless and unformed identity of child during the pre-Oedipal stage.

French feminists based their psychoanalytic theories on Lacan’s study of Freud’s concept of the Oedipal crisis in terms of the acquisition of language. Lacan calls the pre-linguistic and pre-Oedipal stage of maternal closeness as Imaginary when the child sees no separation between itself and the world. But soon it enters into the Symbolic Order when it starts identifying with its own mirror-image and takes up a subject position and learns to speak ‘I am’. This entry into Symbolic Order is marked by the repression of its desire for the maternal body and an unconscious surrender to the law of the father. But this repression of the desire fails to eliminate it completely and it is this irrepresible unconscious that feminists emphasised. They held that the conscious symbolic order
(patriarchal order and control) was not natural but learnt and so, could easily be overthrown.

Feminists examining the psychic roots of patriarchy drew heavily on Lacan’s theory which describes the Phallus as an imaginary object in possession of the father. It “should be understood as a cultural construction that attributes symbolic power to the biological penis... but this does not mean that men possess the phallus”. It is “only through another’s desire that man feels he has the phallus”. Thus Lacan “strips bare masculinity for the cultural construction it is” (Ramsey 175) and this appeals to the feminists analysing the gender construction.

Appropriating psychoanalysis as a means of understanding gender formation, French feminists made a significant impact on feminist thought of late second wave feminism. Julia Kristeva developed a theory of “subjectivity in relation to both language and the play of drives and impulses anterior to language” on the basis of Lacan’s concepts of the Symbolic and Imaginary (Habib 693). Kristeva describes the pre-linguistic and pre-Oedipal phase as ‘semiotic’ in which impulses and drives circulate through the child’s body. The Symbolic, marked by rationality and influenced by ‘repressive political structures’ is the entry into language and society. The semiotic corresponds to the “genotext” which refers to the underlying foundation of language, the underlying play of impulses and drives which can be discerned through various linguistic devices such as rhyme, melody, intonation and rhythm of the text. The symbolic corresponds to the phenotext denoting communicative language which obeys a set of rules. The Symbolic is always working to towards repression of the semiotic. So language is masculine which suppresses the female difference.
Another French psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray resembles Kristeva in her linking of language and sexuality but she also emphasises feminine identity as plural. Irigary praises the radical ‘otherness’ of women’s eroticism which offers potential for the foundation of a feminine symbolic order allowing women’s difference from men to be celebrated.

Hélène Cixous too believed in “some essential form of feminine ‘behind’ language within the girl’s pre-Oedipal fantasised relationship with the other” (Ramsey 177). Associated with the term écriture feminine, Cixous describes it as a style of discourse, the mother tongue, the female voice, rooted in the pre-Symbolic Imaginary. She writes in The Newly-Born Woman (1975) that it is “the voice, a song before the law, before the breath was split by the symbolic, reappropriated into language under the authority that separates the deepest, most ancient and adorable of visitations” (qtd. in Ramsey 177).

Described as a uniquely feminine style of writing, écriture feminine emanated from the feminism of French critics like Irigaray, Cixous and Kristeva. They believed that a ‘feminine’ area of textual production exists beneath the surface of masculine discourse. Disrupting masculine language, it comes to the surface in text in form of gaps, silences, puns, rhythms, and new images. It is “eccentric, incomprehensible, and inconsistent” (Tolan 335) and sounds unfamiliar because the feminine voice has been repressed for so long. Masculine language is linear, logical, authoritative and realistic and represents the symbolic in these feature, while écriture feminine gives expression to the semiotic and disrupts the ‘law’ of language and order, the symbolic.

French feminism calls for celebration of the fact that women are marginalised. This disruptive, anarchic position on the margins gives them an opportunity to become
“subversive or saboteurs” (Tolan 336). But this position of difference celebrated by French feminism seemed opposed to the position held by Anglo-American feminism which denied differences of specifically female consciousness to support equality with men. In reality *écriture féminine* is not necessarily essentialist as the mode of writing advocated by it could be appropriated by either sex. Cixous’ argument that masculinity and femininity were free of biological sex and Kristeva’s description of fragmentary writing as anti-phallic rather than feminine gives them a radically anti-essentialist position.

Eco-feminism, another variant of feminism, analyses the relationship between “the patriarchal oppression of women and the human domination of non-human nature”. It uses the theoretical ideas of cultural feminists who use a binary thought system to emphasise the relationship of domination and subordination, “like writing and speech, mind and body, civilisation and nature, human and animal, masculine and feminine”. Ecofeminists focus upon the oppressive hierarchical relationships in the different age-old practices of domination like class oppression, sexism, racism and the over-exploitation of nature and find that the dominant and the exploiter is gendered as masculine and the subordinate and the exploited is feminised. They contest the assumption that “human interests are superior to non-human interests, and men more valuable than women, the rich more valuable than the poor, whites more valuable than blacks, and the First World more valuable than the Third World”. They act to expose the reality of the class, race and gender-specificity of this oppression. Drawing parallels between the exploitation of women and nature and the identification of both as passive and powerless, the ecofeminists also promote a positive identification of nature with the reproductive
capacity of women. They also expose the masculine bias of western science and technology which tries to control and appropriate nature – “both the human female reproductive capacity and the reproductive power of non-human nature”. They do not favour ‘femininity’ as a replacement of ‘masculinity’ as this new hierarchy would again follow the same system of exploitation. Instead, ecofeminists demand “a feminine organising principle that would transform consciousness as well as relations of production and reproduction within the global community” (Madsen 122-126).

During the second wave of feminism, different voices expressed their disagreement with the prominent white middle-class women-dominated feminism projecting itself as a universal voice of women around the world. It was accused of representing the views of a privileged minority which ignored the voice of black, lesbian and ‘Third World’ women. Emphasising the double burden of race and gender, the black women refused to support the basically middle-class white women’s liberation movement and demanded an anti-imperialist and anti-racist commitment from it. Similarly, the ‘Third World’ women too, raised the issue of racist hierarchy of privilege and accused the white women of having constructed the Third World woman as the ‘other’ to her self. Feminism was also attacked for its presumption of a heterosexual norm by the lesbian feminists. With differences emerging between black feminism, lesbian feminism, liberal feminism and socialist feminism, it was obvious that the movement was not unified one. The political differences and political exclusions within feminist movement were much in evidence. Sue Thornham observes:

“During the thirty-year period since the beginning of the ‘second-wave’, feminism has acquired an academic voice both within and beyond women’s
studies, but as a political identity it has fractured along lines of multiple differences between women, and both young women and high-profile media women seem to believe that ‘second wave feminism’ has dissolved into post feminism” (42).

Charting the progression of feminist discourse and dividing the differences within feminism into essentialists and anti-essentialists category, Fiona Tolan comments:

According to Kristeva, Feminism begins with liberalism, when women demand equality with men; then, reacting against equality feminism, radical feminists reject patriarchy in favour of a separatist matriarchy; finally, women come to reject altogether the difference between masculine and feminine as metaphysical. The first two stages respond to equality (anti-essentialist) and difference (essentialist) feminism, and both have competed for ascendancy throughout the history of second wave feminism. The third position, however, begins to move feminism away from the second wave, and into a third wave, sometimes called ‘post-feminism’, where issue of gender difference falls away to the deconstruction of gender itself”. (338)

In her attempt to deconstruct authoritative paradigms and practices, Judith Butler in her famous book *Gender Trouble* (1990) developed an argument about the fluidity of gender. Describing masculinity and femininity as artificial constructs created by imposed heterosexuality, Butler deconstructed the binary gender categories and emphasised that a number of possible gender positions could be taken. Her assertion that the identity of ‘woman’ is a fiction which is created and maintained by certain actions dictated by the concept of ‘woman’ hit the feminist politics which revolves around the concept of
‘woman’. In the absence of a stable identity of ‘woman’ there can be no movement for women’s liberation. The post feminist radical attempt to dismantle those dualisms that support gendered hierarchy was criticised by those feminists who supported the political activism of the movement and wanted to renew their efforts for improving women’s lives in this third wave of feminism.

In this new era or the third wave of feminism there is a clear rejection of theory as women are more interested in living feminist lives in their own different ways. Instead of being tied down to theories, women in this phase of feminism must confront the unique problems of their particular lives. Respecting the differences between women and their peculiar situations, feminism must continue to engage itself in women’s cause and problems which are yet far from over.

This diversity of feminist approaches and ideas has certainly made an impact on the feminist theatre which started evolving almost simultaneously with feminist movements and was supported and created largely by women informed by the post–1968 women’s movements. Feminist theatre is influenced by different perspectives, and also by the view of both, the theatre practitioners and theorists who are regularly engaged in the process of creating and assessing the same work. Potentially divisive social and feminist movements have shaped the feminist theatres. The diversity and difference of approach in these various social and feminist ideas resulted in a variety of feminist theatres and cultural representations of women. There is not one feminism, nor one feminist theatre. With this diversity of feminist approaches to staging feminist experience it becomes all the more difficult to confine the term ‘feminist theatre’ within a definition. Yet, a tentative definition of feminist theatre may be given as a political theatre oriented
towards change, produced by women with feminist concerns. It aims to subvert expectation, so as to enable or initiate positive change in the life of women through political and theatrical representation. Feminist theatre, like other forms of political theatre, as Joan Lipkin emphasises “must be directly and uncompromisingly political in order to effect social change” (quoted in Goodman, 17).

Most feminist theatre is ‘alternative theatre’ as it is created by women in the context of patriarchal culture and offers an alternative in women’s representation. Traditional measures of value used to evaluate drama cannot be applied to the study of feminist theatre. It is only through a measure of alternative set of values provided by feminist and cultural theories of representation, feminist theatre can be analysed suitably.

The roots of feminist theatre can be traced in the suffrage plays staged by the Actress Franchise League in early twentieth century. This ‘first wave’ of feminist theatre was informed by the politics of gender and power issues. The rise of the women’s movement around 1969 gave way to the first specifically gender-oriented political demonstrations long after the era of the suffragists. A number of demonstrations against the Miss World and Miss America Pageants staged during 1969-71 raised the issue of stereotyping the women as sex objects. Early ‘women’s libbers’ participating in these demonstrations realized the potential of public performance as means of creating awareness and spreading their messages. These protests were primarily political with feminist messages and presented as theatre performance. These demonstrations can be easily considered as the first major step towards the making of organised feminist theatre.

It was followed by the emergence of a number of early feminist agitprop groups such as The Women’s Street Theatre Group. Gradually, more organised forms of feminist theatre
developed when more sophisticated and complexly developed plays, with more subtle characterisation edged out the issue based agitprop.

The growth of fringe theatre companies around 1968 gave impetus to the subsequent development of theatre groups focused on women and feminist issues. Some of the prominent groups among them were The Women’s Street Theatre Group, Monstrous Regiment, and Mrs. Worthington’s Daughters. The political and feminist climate of 1970s invigorated the feminist theatre with a new consciousness of sexual politics. A variety of female and gay experiences translated into dramatic representations in these alternative theatres.

Feminist theatre like feminism grew and developed out of political and social unrest during late 1960s and early years of the 1970s and in their protest against the dominant culture of patriarchy, they looked for ways to defy the mainstream in their alternative set of values and definitions. Opposed to the concept of canonization and mainstream production, feminist theatre remained largely alternative and so very few feminist plays have been produced at major established theatres of London and America.

Many factors such as staging and interpretation, political content and intent are taken into consideration while determining whether any given theatre is really feminist or just a performance by ‘woman’s theatre’. Acknowledging a distinction between the two, Susan Bassnett says:

There is a problem of the term ‘women’s theatre’ as opposed to ‘feminist theatre’ and although reviewers tend to use the two randomly, it does seem that there is a distinction to be made. ‘Feminist theatre logically bases itself on the established concerns of the organised Women’s Movement, on the seven demands …. These
seven demands, of which the first four were established in 1970, and the remainder in 1975 and 1978 show a shift towards a more radical concept of feminism that asserts female homosexuality and perceives violence as originating from men. The tendency therefore is not so much towards a revaluation of the role of women within society as we know it, but towards the creation of a totally new set of social structures in which the traditional male-female roles will be redefined. (447)

Bassnett’s emphasis on the reviewing and reconstruction of gender roles is important in the political context of feminist theatre. The term ‘women’s theatre’ used as a general term may dramatize ‘women’s common experience’ which may not have sufficient grounds for assumption of political intent or action as ‘feminist theatre’ has. All feminist theatre can be ‘women’s theatre’ but all ‘women’s theatre’ may not be feminist theatre which is essentially informed by feminist ideas and aims to achieve positive re-evaluation of women’s roles and effect social change.

The aim of feminist theatre has always been to effect change in terms of cultural representation, as also theatrical. When women realized that within mixed gender theatre groups they were often marginalized, they decided to form new groups in which they could voice their concerns and their interests were prioritized. Feminist theatre groups preferred collectives. The earliest theatre collectives in Britain included Red Ladder, Joint Stock, Welfare State International, 7:84, Belt and Braces, Women’s Theatre Group, Monstrous Regiment, and Gay Sweatshop, all formed in the late 1960s and early to mid-1970s.
The original theatre collectives worked on the principal of equal responsibility given to members for all aspects of production. This system allowed every member to contribute to the process of creating a play in a most democratic way and gave no special opportunity to individuals with particular skill. Formed basically to defy the traditionally paternalistic structures prevalent in mainstream theatre, these collectives were not necessarily giving an opportunity to make any strong, unified statement. The diversity of perspectives though enriched the collective ‘voice’ of any given play but these too many cooks certainly spoiled the broth, as the plays looked weak due to “overt politics superseding artistic form” (Goodman 54). Despite the fault of the form, most of the practitioners of such groups still preferred to work collectively for sometime, choosing “to risk the potential flaws of the means in favour of its possibly liberating ends” (Goodman 54).

Feminist movement demanded freedom from male subjugation and control and asserted the women’s right to control their own bodies in reproduction and representation, or of self-representation in society. In theatre too, many women opted for the co-operative when they found themselves deprived of freedom of expression and control over the dramatic process within some alternative companies. The working method of these co-operatives followed the principle of the non-paternalistic power base, but also allowed for exploitation (use) of individual skills.

Monstrous Regiment, one of the earliest feminist theatre collectives, initiated Caryl Churchill into a novel and unique way of writing plays. Set up as a permanent collective and committed to the cause of both feminism and socialism, Monstrous Regiment (named after the title of misogynist, sixteenth-century pamphlet by John Knox)
began with a commitment to foregrounding the work and experiences of women and aimed at reversing the conventional balance of power between the sexes:

The company… ensures that women form the majority and take on decisive roles, and also commissions work by women writers dealing with themes throwing light on the position of society…

In another press release the group declared:

We see ourselves as part of the growing and lively movement to improve the status of women. Our work explores the experience of women past and present, and we want to place that experience in the centre of the stage, instead of in the wings. (quoted in Wandor 1986, 58)

It has long survived as a role model for feminist theatre and continues to promote the work of women artists.

Feminist theatre, a form of cultural representation is shaped and influenced by various disciplines, cultural, literary and dramatic. There may be various set of criteria for evaluating feminist theatre but feminist criticism can be constructively employed for evaluation of feminist theatre. As it emerged and developed as a protest against the hierarchical structures of patriarchal (dominant) culture, it seems particularly inappropriate to evaluate the feminist theatre according to the standards of that culture. No adequate standard has been fixed yet for measuring the value of feminist plays. Lizbeth Goodman states the basic tenets of a tentative theory of feminist theatre:

Feminist theatres are those theatres created (primarily) by women with political concerns influenced by the development of the post-1968 women’s movement(s),
and/or by issues of real importance to the daily lives of women, both in terms of the
concerns of local communities and of women around the world (238).

Further, answering to the question ‘what makes feminist theatre good theatre’, Goodman states:

If it serves a real purpose, to the bettering of women’s lives or public understanding of women’s lives, then it is ‘good feminist politics’ and perhaps also ‘good theatre’. If it provides enlightenment or entertainment without dismissing or undermining women in the process, then perhaps it is ‘good theatre’. (239)

The best feminist theatre inspires social change and it does so by forcing people to think and question.

A very important question related to the aesthetic value of feminist theatre is often raised by critics. A high degree of literary value or aesthetic value, again determined by traditional standards, may enhance a play but its aesthetic value alone may not bring about social change which has been regarded as an essential characteristic of feminist theatre and feminist movements both.

To explore the possibilities of a political consciousness leading to social change, the theories of Bertolt Brecht can be applied to the study of feminist theatre as Brecht is characterised by “his persistent antagonism to closed systems of representation and his emphasis on constructing specifically socialist paradigm” (Reinelt 1996, 82). The idea of a political revolt as a necessary step to bring change in a society constitutes an important element in the making of feminist theatre. Janelle Reinelt explains how Brechtian conception of theatre is appropriate to the study of feminist theatre for two reasons: first,
because “both Brecht and feminist theatre foreground political agendas in what might be called ‘platform theatres’”, and second, because “the task of Brecht and also of feminist theatre is to interrupt and deconstruct the habitual performance codes of the majority (male) culture” (Goodman, 20).

In the absence of any well defined definition and theory of feminist theatre, Goodman’s list of “Exemplary plays and performance pieces” in her chapter “British Feminist Theatre in an International Context” provides us with a virtual guide map to reach a better understanding of the important elements of feminist theatre:

1. Gray Sweatshop’s Care and Control: [Brought] the social issue of child custody… onto the stage … effecting social change … offered positive representation of lesbian women and heterosexual women united in the attempt to address a common problem … more women’s issues’ addressed….

2. Caryl Churchill’s Top Girls: … experimental in form, using overlapping dialogue and skewed time frames … ‘reclaims’ women from history and gives them voices … to look at the situation of the working mother and career woman …. Real conflicts which many women face ….

3. Sarah Daniels’ Masterpieces: … takes one of the most controversial issues in the study of cultural representation and gender (pornography) … on the stage in a direct political way …. prioritizing of feminist politics above ‘literary value’ …. undoubtedly and unashamedly feminist. It urges social thought and action….
4. Bryony Lavery’s *Her Aching Heart*: … subverted audience expectation and theatrical ‘traditions’ with and through the medium of comedy.

5. Black Mime Theatre Women’s Troop’s *Mothers*: … communicates through gesture, mime, spoken language and body language (thereby making itself accessible to a very wide audience) ….

6. Women’s Theatre Group’s *Lear’s Daughters*: … potential to infuse young audiences with a budding feminist consciousness ….

7. Monstrous Regiment’s *Medea*: … clearly informed by feminist thought on the subject of giving voice to women who have been silenced in the past … it raises issues of linearity and formal structures influenced by gender … dares to pose questions and not to offer easy answers.

8. Victoria Worsley and Caroline Ward’s *Make Me A Statue*: … offers visual, physical, engaging viewing while it inspires thought about the treatment of women artists … informed by feminist theory …. challenges the traditional boundaries between dance and theatre and performance art …. (227-28)

This list with a variety of plays and performances chosen for a number of reasons as explained by Goodman makes it amply clear that feminist theatre takes many forms which may give it, many argue, an ambiguous identity but this variety and multiplicity of perspectives should be accepted as a positive sign for the further growth of feminist theatre which continues to grow and develop inspite of its marginalisation in canons of

Feminist theatre was an artistic response to the lived experience of social and cultural exclusion. To express the experiences of social and cultural marginalization, feminist playwrights looked for different styles, forms and techniques to mark a break from dominant culture. Different feminisms coloured feminist theatre in a variety of shades. In subsequent chapters an attempt will be made to analyse Churchill’s five plays in the context of feminist movement and theories and the ever evolving feminist theatre.
**WORKS CITED**


