Chapter 2

CULTURAL FEMINISM
Feminism is basically a western concept. In the second half of the twentieth century, Feminism emerged as the most powerful movement that almost swept the literary world. It has been articulated differently in different parts of the world including India, by different people especially women depending upon their class, background and level of consciousness. The term 'Feminism' was first used by the French dramatist Alexander Dumas in 1872 in a pamphlet L' Homme femme to designate the then emerging women's movement for rights. Feminism stands for the struggle or protest by women against their continuing low status at work, in society and in the culture of the country. Initially, in the western countries, women revolted to fight for emancipation and liberation from all forms of oppression by the state, by society and by men.

According to the World Book, "Feminism is a belief that women should have economic, political and social equality with men".\(^1\) In the same book we find that feminism also refers to a "Political movement that works to gain such equality as economic, political and social. This movement is sometimes called Women's Movement or Women's Rights Movement".\(^2\)

Thus Feminism is a socio-cultural movement to secure a complete equality of women with men in enjoyment of all rights - moral, religious, social, political, education, legal, economic and so on. It
originated in Europe and gradually emerged to become a worldwide cultural movement.

The history of western feminist movement or feminism and the efforts to overturn gender inequality have been divided into three major periods which the Feminist scholars termed as "Three Waves". The first wave refers to the Suffrage Movement in the early Twentieth Century. It took place between 1860 and 1930 and this movement played a significant role in uniting the women of different backgrounds. Women campaigned for suffrage and fought for their rights. They realised that they would have to fight for equality and justice and should not rely on political parties. The early feminists such as Aphra Ben and Mary Stell in the later part of the eighteenth century and in the beginning of nineteenth century advocated women's welfare and the importance was given to the notion of natural human worth, individual value, equality, equal rights, reason, education, free opportunity, privilege, heredity, wealth and power. Elizabeth Candy Stanton, the nineteenth century American Suffragist showed a clear sense of women's role and responsibilities and argued that because man and woman complement one another, we need women's thought in national affairs to make safe and stable government. Margaret Fuller and Lucretia are other feminists who were concerned with securing legal rights for women in marriage, education and employment. Thus the first wave feminism started with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" and activities and writings of Gimike sisters (United States) which
culminated in the winning of the vote in 1920. The first wave of women’s movement almost exhausted after getting suffrage.

The second wave of Feminism started during the nineteen sixties when Women’s Liberation Movement grew out as the wide-spread radical protests by students, workers, blacks and women especially in the USA and France. Betty Frieden’s "The Feminine Mystique” brought it to life in 1963. Women formed their own groups and raised their voice against the secondary role of women.

"In their groups, class and race had little importance and sisterhood was the only one motivating force.”

Eminent feminists who had played an important role in women’s liberation movement were Simone de Beauvoir (The Second Sex, 1949), Betty Friendan (The Feminine Mystique, 1963), Kate Millet (Sexual Politics, 1969) and Germaine Greer (The Female Eunuch, 1970).

After 1970s, there came a sudden change in the feminist movement. During 1970-80 different groups of women were fragmented and fission of women’s movement had started after the recognition of the complexities of women experience. The ‘universalist’ claims of the 1960s have been challenged by the women of working class, third world and Black Women. Thus, second wave feminism dealt with inequality of laws, gender as well as cultural inequalities.

From the year 1980 onwards, further changes were seen into political and critical realms in the feminists’ point of view. The single term 'feminism' changed into 'feminisms'. Comparative models of
parallel feminism from different cultures came into existence. In the Anglo-American tradition there was a growth of "Radical Binarism" (Radicals distinguished from Liberal or social feminism). This can probably be called as Third-wave feminism which concerns about sexism and the issues related to it. This strand sees sexual oppression as primary and fundamental.

"Radical feminism ranged from cultural feminism to more syncretic politics that placed issues of class, economics etc. on a par with patriarchy as sources of oppression".

**Cultural Feminism - Definition and theory**

Cultural feminism is developed from radical feminism. It is an ideology of a "female nature" or "female essence" that attempts to revalidate what cultural feminists consider undervalued female attributes. It is also a theory that commends the difference of women from men. It is based on an essentialist view of the differences between women and men and advocates independence and institution building. It has led feminists to retreat from politics to life-style. Alice Echols, a feminist historian and cultural theorist credits Redstockings member Brooke Williams for introducing the term "Cultural Feminism" in 1975 to describe the depoliticization of radical feminism.

Redstockings, also known as Redstockings of the Women's Liberation Movement, was the most active radical feminist group during 1970s. It was one of the influential but short-lived radical feminist groups of the sixties that produced many of the expressions.
and actions that have become household words to people in the United States such as "Sisterhood is powerful", "Consciousness-Raising", "the personal is political", "The politics of House work", "The Pro-woman line", "The Miss America protest" etc. This group strongly advocated the idea that women's submission to 'Male Supremacy' is a conscious adaptation of their lack of power under patriarchy. Redstockings held the view that all men oppress all women as a class and that it is the responsibility of individual men to give up male supremacy, rather than the responsibility of women to change themselves.

Brooke Williams, one of the members of this Redstockings group, propounded the term ‘Cultural Feminism’ in its true sense and considered cultural feminism as an offshoot of Radical feminism.

“Radical feminism is a current within feminism that focuses on the theory of patriarchy as a system of power that organizes society into a complex of relationships based on an assumption of male supremacy used to oppress women".⁵

Radical feminism aims to challenge and to overthrow patriarchy by opposing standard gender roles and the male oppression of women and calls for a radical reordering of the society. Early radical feminism, arising within second wave feminism in the 1960s, typically viewed patriarchy as the oldest and the most universal form of domination. Cultural feminists support the theory that due to patriarchy, women have come to be viewed as the "Other". They locate the root cause of women's oppression is the male domination in patriarchal gender
relations as opposed to legal systems (as in Liberal feminism) or class conflict (as in socialist feminism and Marxist feminism).

Some radical feminists also acknowledge the simultaneous and intersecting effect of other independent categories of oppression which may include gender identity, race, social class, perceived attractiveness, sexual orientation and ability. Red stockings co-founder Ellen Willis writes in 1984 that radical feminism "got sexual politics recognized as a public issue ........... created the vocabulary ........... with which the second wave of feminism entered popular culture. Spark the drive to legalize abortion, were the first to demand total equality the so-called private spheres (housework, child care ........ emotional and sexual needs)."

Cultural feminists believe that the cause of women's oppression is biological. Their body is the material base of reproduction of human beings. It is natural procreative mechanism; its sexuality is controlled by men through the institutions of marriage and family. The male-culture dominates and oppresses women in socio-economic field. These feminists are committed to change the patriarchal system which is the root cause of many social problems.

According to cultural feminists, sexual freedom must be equally gained by men and women. In the sexual revolution of 1960s the assumption of heterosexuality was challenged by the rise of political lesbianism. Red stockings and the cultural feminists were both radical feminist organizations, but held rather distinct views in the prospect.
Most of the members of Restocking hold a materialist and anti-psychologist view. They view men’s oppression of women as ongoing and deliberate, holding individual men responsible for this oppression. According to them institutions and systems (including the family) are mere vehicles of male intent and reject psychologist explanations of female submissiveness as blaming women for collaboration in their own oppression. Except Brooke Williams, in Red stockings, view, most other tendencies of radical feminism, especially after 1975, are expressions of Cultural feminism.

The cultural feminists hold a more idealistic, psychologistic view, with a greater emphasis on "Sex roles", seeing 'sexism' as rooted in contemporary patterns of male and female behaviour. They emphasize on institutions like marriage, family, prostitution and heterosexuality as all existing to perpetuate the "Sex-role system". In the late 1970s and early 1980s, cultural feminism, as an extension of radical feminism demanded basic human rights for women such as reproduction freedom, child birth, abortion, sterilization or birth control, in short make their choices freely without pressure from individual men, doctors, governmental or religious authorities. They also demanded change in the organisational sexual culture e.g. breaking down traditional gender roles and re-evaluating societal concepts of femininity and masculinity.

"The radicals contend that patriarchal oppression is gender oppression and they concentrate their attention on male gender oppression or female gender strength."7
They reveal that the oppression of women is sexual. Male culture has changed women's bodies into objects of male desire and they are treated as a thing of beauty and sexuality. The cultural feminists consider women as individuals not a class or race. They study their experiences as the experiences of individuals. Women have their own rights and free will. Thus, the primary aim of cultural feminism is to destroy this sex class system.

Some feminists most notably Alice Echols and Ellen Willis, hold that after about 1975 most of what continued to be called "radical feminism" represents a narrow subset of what was originally a more ideologically diverse movement. Echols labels this dominant tendency—"Cultural Feminism" and "view it as a neo Victorian ideology coming out of radical feminism but ultimately antithetical to it." She says, “Whereas the original radical feminism challenge the polarization of the sexes, cultural feminism simply embraces the positive feminine virtues.”

She further writes that this movement is not developed as a coherent analysis of either male or female psychology but ultimately raises hope that its narrow commitment to the "sex-class paradigm" can not fulfill. When these hopes are dashed, it results in despair and it is the foundation of withdrawal into counter culturalism and cultural feminism.

Cultural feminism commends the positive aspects of what is seen as the female character or feminine personality. It is also a feminist theory that praises the positive aspect of women. Early
theorists like Jane Addams and Charlotte Perkins Gilman argue that in governing the state, cooperation, caring and non violence in the settlement of conflicts society seem to be what is needed from women's virtues. They believe in equal partnership of men and women who have separate existence and different basic functions.

The nineteenth century journalism, critic and women's rights activists Margaret Fuller contributes to cultural feminism and Fuller's "Woman in the Nineteenth century" (1845) initiates the cultural feminists’ tradition. It stresses the emotional, intuitive side of knowledge and expresses an organic world view that is quite different from the mechanistic view of Enlightenment rationalists. Linda Alcoff argues that women are over determined by what she sees as patriarchal systems. She contends that,

"Man has said that woman can be defined, delineated, captured, understood, explained and diagnosed to a level of determination never accorded to man himself, who is conceived as a rational animal with free will."10

While cultural feminists argue that the traditional role of women provides a basis for the articulation of a more humane world view, other contemporary feminisms do not believe that this transformation will happen automatically. They do not believe that the differences between women and men are principally biological. Alcoff makes the point that,
"the cultural feminist reappraisal construes women's passivity as her peacefulness, her sentimentality as her proclivity to nurture, her subjectiveness as her advanced self awareness." 11

Thus cultural feminist believe that women are not essentially different, but in certain ways more evolved than men. For example cultural feminism tends to celebrate women's love, nurturing abilities, non-violence and emotional intelligence and view- these traits as female qualities.

This ideology of 'female essence' or 'female nature' reappropriated by the cultural feminists, is an effort to revalidate under valued female attributes. They assert that women's differences are not only unique but superior to men. This theory of feminism takes note of the biological difference between men and women such as menstruation and child birth and extrapolation from this the idea of an inherent 'women's culture'.

Cultural feminism is based on essentialist view of differences between women and men and advocates independence and institution building which led these feminists to retreat from politics to life style. Cultural feminism is a variety of feminism which emphasises essential differences between men and women, based on biological differences in reproductive capacity. It attributes to those differences distinctive and superior virtues in women.

The phrase "essential difference" refers to the belief that the gender differences are a part of the essence of females and males.
These differences are not chosen but are part of the nature of woman and man i.e. we are born with certain traits. Biologically essential differences between men and women differs their skills and social behaviour. It is applicable for men as a group and women as a group or any individual man will have the same difference from any individual woman. It means men and women, both possess certain peculiar characteristics which are different in its essence and are inherent. It is permanent, unalterable and eternal. For human beings it can be defined as an eternal and unchangeable human nature.

Essentialist positions on gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity or other group characteristics consider these to be fixed traits, which do not allow for variations among individuals or overtime In simple terms, essentialism is a generalisation stating that certain properties possessed by a group (e.g. people, things, ideas) are universal and not dependent on context such as "all human beings compete with each other for success."

**Feminism in India - Difference between the feminist views of India and the West:**

The socio-cultural and political set-up of India and women’s position in them reveals that feminism is theorized differently in India than the west. Historical circumstances and value in India make women’s issues different from the western feminist rhetoric. The Western feminists are more concerned to fight for equal legal, political, economic and social rights for their woman. Though western countries
are committed to the ideology of democracy and equality for all, but in actual practice, women have been never accorded equal rights. In her oft-quoted words, Simone de Beauvoir has pointed out how men see woman as 'the other'. She says,

"She is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute she is the other." ¹²

This necessitated the need for western women to organize and fight for their rights, as is seen in the long and painful Suffragette Movements of the Western feminists. But in India, women always enjoyed equal rights and after Independence these equal rights for women have been guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. So there has been no need to organize and fight for such women's rights, nor is there as much justification for anger against lawful suppression of women. Here, the icon of women as "powerful" is accommodated into patriarchal culture through religion. This has retained visibility in all sections of society, by providing women with traditional and cultural spaces.

Ancient India witnessed an equal position of men and women. Works by ancient Indian grammarians such as Patanjali and Katyayana suggest that women were educated in the early Vedic period. Hindu epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata suggest women's marriage at a mature age and freedom to select their husband by organizing 'Swayamvers’ Scriptures such as Rig Veda and Upanishads mention several women sages and seers, notably Gargi and Maitreyi.
Thus, India is the place where the ideology of superiority of women was well established and considered by men too in the form -

“Yasya Naryastu poojyante Ramante tatra Devtaḥ.”

(It means where women are honoured the God lives there). In the Vedic period, women were worshipped as goddesses like Durga, Parvati and Lakshmi etc. Some kingdoms in the ancient India had traditions such as nagarvadhu (“bride of the city”). Women competed to win the coveted title of the nagarvadhu. The title used to be given to the woman who is the most beautiful and learned among all other women in the kingdom. She must be proficient in all art forms – music, dance, drama and literature. She must be skilled in all the inter-personal relationships and social behaviour. A nagarvadhu is a respectable figure who lives in royal protection and patronage and is a courtesan. She is a social being who enjoys both respect and individuality which she acquires through her qualities as a woman. In this way she is superior to men in all respects. Amrapali is the most famous example of a nagarvadhu as portrayed in “Vaishali Ki Nagarvadhu” by Acharya Chaturves. The book talks about the relationships with families and the society in general, the more or less equal role played by men and woman and the respect that they commanded in society.

Cultural feminism in the West considers that women are superior to men as their tradition believed in the secondary roles of women. The Western ideology believes in separate identity of man and
woman as they do not believe in unification of identities. They are joined by a combinatory force but remain separated with equal identity and individuality or have equal partnership in a whole. While in India both man and woman work as one body of complementary nature. They believe in unified and merged identities in which their separate existences combined together with different and defined roles as in *Ardhanareeswara* (half-woman and half-man). Both man and woman are mutual, one sustaining whole and complementing the other even while preserving their individual autonomous identities. As quoted by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, the President of India,

“The relation Male and female constitute ordinarily a fundamental unity of man and woman is the expression of an urge for duality. Each is a self which requires the other as its complement. The division of the sexes is a biological phenomenon, not a historical event.”

But as the time passed from Ancient to Medieval period, the condition of women changed and they suffered from economic and socio-cultural disadvantages. They have been deprived of their basic rights, their aspirations to their individuality and self reliance. Besides several restraints of gender, tradition and orthodoxy of religion, Indian women became the victims of many social evils like Sati, child marriage and ban on widow remarriage and Dowry etc. At this time, men like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidya Sagar, Dayanand Saraswati led the reform movements against these evil social practices and other abuses on women. Thus, the male and female dichotomy of
polar opposites with the former oppressing the latter at all times is refuted in the Indian context because it was men who initiated social reform movements against various social evils. The main difference between the Indian and Western radical feminists is that in India, there is no negation of man’s influence in the lives of women.

In the second half of the nineteenth century the stray ideas of Women’s Liberation Movement (1860-1930) of the West had started seeping into Indian society. Indian scholars and reformers have struggled to carve a separate identity for females in India as the socio-cultural conditions here were quite different from the West. They defined feminism in their own way to avoid the uncritical following of the Western ideas. The feminism in India is based on the theory of deconstructing mutually exclusive notions of femininity and masculinity as biologically determined categories and opens the way towards and equitable society for both men and women Thus, the widely used definition of Feminism is

"An awareness of women’s oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within the family, and conscious action by women and men to change this situation".  

As feminism in India is not a singular theoretical orientation; it has changed over time in relation to historical and cultural realities, levels of consciousness, perceptions and actions of individual men and women or both as a group. So, the history of feminism in India can be divided into three major phases.
**First Phase : 1850-1915**

The feminism in India emerged in the form of nationalism and social reform movements related to caste and gender relations. During the uprising of 1857 against the British Rule, women of the ruling class came together along with the men to fulfill their ambition for an independent India. Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar and the famous Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi had become iconic figures in the Indian political arena. The first phase of feminism in India was initiated by men to uproot the social evils of sati (widow immolation), forbidding of widow remarriage, child marriage and illiteracy, as well as regulation of the age of consent and property rights through legal interventions. Chief reformers who came out for the cause of women were- Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Vivekanand, Jyotirao Phule, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and others. They not only tried to wipe out the social evils but also laid stress on women’s education to bring them into the mainstream of development. As Swami Vivekanand said-

“All nations have attained greatness by paying proper respect to women. That country and that nation which did not respect woman have never become great, nor will ever in future. The principal reason why your race is so much degraded is that you had no respect for these living images of Shakti”16

In these reform movements some women reformists too came forward and brought momentum in the emancipation of women in
India. Well known among them are Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, Anandi Gopal Joshi, Sister Nivedita, Bikaji Cama and Annie Besant. These women not only helped in the eradication of conservative traditional attitude but also encouraged other women to participate in freedom struggle of the country.

Literature underwent a significant change with the emergence of these visionary men and women activists and scholars in the society. Rabindranath Tagore was an icon of Indian culture. He was a poet, philosopher, musician, writer and an educationist. Between 1893 and 1900 Tagore wrote seven volumes of poetry, which included Sonar Tari (The Golden Boat) and Khanika and a number of dramas and novels in Bengali. In 1901, Rabindranath Tagore became the editor of the magazine Bangadarshan. Rabindranath Tagore became the first Asian to became Nobel laureate when he won Nobel Prize for his collection of poems, Gitanjali, in 1913. Other major writers of this time were Sarat Chandra Chatterjee and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee who contributed significantly to feminist literature in India.

**Second Phase: 1915-1974**

With the upsurge of Nationalism between 1917 and 1945, the women’s movement took up two main issues - political rights for women and reform of personal laws. This led to the foundation of the Women’s Indian Association (WIA) in 1917 by Annie Besant. While on the one hand women’s organizations were fighting for women’s political and economic rights and trying to improve their position by education
and social reform, women’s struggle entered a new phase with the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi on the Indian political scene. The involvement of really large number of women in the national movement began when Gandhi launched the first Non Co-operation Movement and gave a special role to women. Women participated in the Salt satyagraha, in the Civil Disobedience Movement, in the Quit India Movement and in all the Gandhian Satyagraha. He called them “Stree Shakti” and believed in their equal potential and participation in his campaign. Gandhi legitimized and expanded Indian women’s public activities by exalting their feminine roles of caring, self-abnegation, sacrifice and tolerance; and carved a niche for those in public space. In his campaign his wife Kasturbai Gandhi helped him and worked for women education and health. In the opinion of Mahatma Gandhi man and woman are equal in status, but are not identical. They are a peerless pair each being complementary to the other; each helps the other, so that without the one the existence of the other can not be conceived. Thus, anything that will impair the status of either of them will involve an equal ruin of both. He gave supreme place to companionship between man and woman and firmly supported equal and complementary roles of them in various spheres of life. He said-

"Woman is man’s companion, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the activities of man to the very minutest detail and she has an equal right to freedom and liberty as him. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as man is in his. This ought to be the natural condition of things and not just as a
result of learning to read and write. By sheer force of a vicious custom, even the most ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying superiority over women which they do not deserve and ought not to have. Many of our movements stop halfway and much of our work does not yield appropriate results because of the condition of our women.”

Women played an important part in India’s independence struggle. Some of the famous freedom fighters include Bhikaji Cama, Dr. Annie Besant, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kriplani and Kasturba Gandhi and Kamla Nehru. Sarojini Naidu, a poet and a freedom fighter, was the first Indian woman to become the President of the Indian National Congress and the first woman to become the governor of a state in India. She talked about Indian traditional set up, which has a very strong hold over the society and even stronger over its women folk. She was not only a strong supporter of equal rights and education of women in India but also laid stress on responsibilities to be governed by them. As in the words of the Nightingale of India Sarojini Naidu –

*Our national questions come and go; they are result of the time changing spirit; but one question that has never changed since the beginning of the time itself, and life itself, is the duty of womanhood, the influence of womanhood, the sanctity of womanhood, the simple womanhood as the divinity of God upon earth, the responsibility of womanhood in shaping the divinity into daily life*”
Women’s participation in the freedom struggle developed their critical consciousness about their role and rights in independent India. This resulted in the introduction of the franchise and civic rights of women in the Indian constitution. Women only organizations like All India Women’s Conference and National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) emerged. The state adopted a patronizing role towards women. Women in India did not have to struggle for basic rights as did women in the West. The colonial venture into modernity brought concepts of democracy, equality and individual rights. But the country was still facing problems like poverty, untouchability, East-West encounter and changes in socio-political set up after the partition in 1947.

Literature of this phase was stirred with the nationalist upsurge and the social realities. The writers of this Gandhian Era (1920-1947) were acutely conscious of India’s past and present socio-cultural status and tried to fill it with new hopes for the future. Three major Indian English Novelists –Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao began their career during this phase. Apart from feminism as the central subject, the fiction of this period discovered some of its most significant themes such as- the ordeal of the freedom struggle, East-West relationship, the communal problem and the plight of the untouchables, the landless poor, the economically exploited etc. At the dawn of independent India, along with this leading trio, a few other novelists like Bhabani Bhattacharya, Khushwant Singh, Manohar Malgontkar and Aamir Ali also added new dimensions to social portraiture of post-independence.
As far as feminism is concerned, the position of women in independent India became stronger as they participated in all activities such as education, sports, politics, media, art and culture, service sectors, science and technology, etc. In 1947, Sarojini Naidu became the governor of the United Provinces, and in the process became India's first woman governor. In the year 1953, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit became the first woman (and first Indian) president of the United Nations General Assembly. Sucheta Kriplani became the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, the first woman to hold that position in any Indian state. Indira Gandhi became the first woman Prime Minister of India. From the year women in India never looked back as in the year 1970, Kamaljit Sandhu became the first Indian woman to win a Gold in the Asian Games and in 1972 Kiran Bedi became the first female recruit to join the Indian Police Service.

Along with the advancement in various fields like politics, sports and education, women in the socio-cultural set-up felt deeply frustrated by their restricted and regimented lives. The lack of economic freedom, the physical burden and the drabness of a monotonous family life have impeded the free growth of their feminine self. More and more women had education, which naturally, made them discontented with their roles as housewives. Thus, the striking emergence of female writers was an interesting phenomenon of this phase as till now the literary field was dominated by male writers. The novelists like Kamala Markandeya, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Attia Hussain, Nayantara Sahgal made an attempt to transform
their own experience as women as well as their femininity into literary expression. Even though these writers were still conditioned by the models handed down to them by the literary geniuses of the Gandhian era, but new perspectives were visible owing to the political and social events and the impact of the Women’s Movement of 1970 on Indian women. These women writers achieved the task of self-representation which has continued till the next phase.

**Third Phase: 1974 onwards**

The success story of women in India continued in this phase too. With the rise of a new wave of feminism across the world, a new generation of Indian feminists emerged. Women have developed themselves according to the situations and achieved advancement in various fields. They have left no stone unturned in establishing their own existence as an individual as well as a social being. They have proved their triumphant potential in almost every sphere of life. *Mother Teresa, Bachendri Pal, Kalpana Chawla, Sushmita Sen, Aishwarya Rai, Karnam Malleswari, Pratibha Patil, Meira Kumar* are the few examples which significantly show that the position of women is quite strong in the present time as compared to the past.

Today we can boast of many developments in various areas like politics, films, jobs, business, banks, stock market, a newspaper, a TV channel, Defense, Police etc. and in all these areas women are working shoulder to shoulder with men. But,
"We should not delude ourselves into believing that a few women making it to the top in the world of sports, business, media or any other area where women were formerly not noticed, means that Indian women have overcome all barriers."

The women today are still facing many obstacles like domestic violence, dowry, sexual abuse, Gang rapes, rape by father in laws/close relatives etc. Women are exploited in forced labour in massage parlours, escort services, brothels, street prostitution and pornography. Women have achieved greatness in all walks of life and proved beyond doubt that they can do anything men can do, and much more, but recognition and gender equality are still evading them. As a result, the 1970s and 1980s witness the growth of numerous women’s groups that take up issues such as dowry deaths, bride burning, rape, sati and focused on violence against women. They stress the sexual oppression of women in a way previous reform or feminist groups had never done. They question the patriarchal assumptions underlying women’s role in the family and society based on the biological sex differences. Such a questioning of the patriarchal character of the family and society is not evident in the earlier phase of the women’s movement. Thus, they hold the view that the first step towards women’s liberation is to become aware of such patriarchal assumptions based on biological sex differences and roles. They have become independent in respect of their reproductive right. Contemporary Indian feminists are fighting for individual autonomy, rights, freedom, independence, tolerance, co-operation, nonviolence and diversity,
domestic violence, gender, stereotypes, sexuality, discrimination, sexism, objectification, patriarchy, abortion, reproduction, control of the female body, divorce, equal pay, maternity leave, breast feeding, prostitution and education.

In literary field also this phase is marked by the dominance of ‘women’s writing’ with the emergence of women novelists like Shashi Deshpande, Bharti Mukharjee, Kamala Das, Namita Gokhale, Dina Mehta, Nina Sibal, Uma Vasudev, Shobha De, Manju Kapur and Arundhati Roy. In Regional literature Amrita Pritam (Punjabi), Kusum Ansal (Hindi) and Sarojini Sahoo (Oriya) and Saraswathy Amma (Malayalam) are some eminent writers whose works are translated in English to become a part of Indo-Anglican Literature in India. Most of these writers have made a link of sexuality with feminism and write for the idea "a woman’s right" in Indian languages.

Shobha De a well-known name in modern Indian literature always remains unique in selecting the subjects in her novels. She deals with the aristocrat class or the titled class. The erotic content of her novels makes her controversial and suggests that she is encountering the taboos held by many women writers. In other words, her writings show a clear cut deviation from the other women novelists in dealing with feminism. Most of the early female writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande focused on the themes of Quest for identity and meaning, alienation, individuality, self-assertion and marital incompatibility etc. as discussed in the previous chapter.
According to Shobha De women authors of the past were sidelined and completely ignored and their opinions were restricted within the boundaries created by men. She mainly deals with the issues concerning the modern society like extra-marital relations and sex in a very bold and unconventional way. Love, sex and marriage or its failure are some of the main themes of writing of Shobha De.

Shobha De never hesitates in boldly presenting her views and opinions. She writes for the masses and expresses her views on women’s sexuality very clearly. She believes in frank narration of incidents and selections with a touch of open-heartedness. She is often compared to Amrita Pritam and Kamala Das for the treatment of her subject matter and outspoken attitude. In Kamala Das and Amrita Pritam, we find expressions of physical instincts of a women persona in a very bold and assertive manner. They create an account of a woman’s life that tries to live traditionally but is forced to break the rules in order to satisfy her urges. Kamala Das and Amrita Pritam while searching their bodies, they also focus on inner-self, the physical experience that leads to the spiritual realization and conjugal bliss for what an insatiate personality long for. But in Shobha De most of her women characters use their physical instincts as power window/ladder to achieve their ambitions. Shobha De gives an exposure to individual social glamour and is more inclined towards western feminism.
In Indian setup family is the basic unit of all relationships. In the Indian cultural context, feminists in India have taken into account the continued prevalence of the institutions of family and marriage. Women in India believe to have an enduring and understanding marital bond or a loving family. But in the West, Marriage and Family is the centre of pleasure and convenience. There is no importance given to family as a unit or binding force. Western feminists like Germaine Greer and radicals like Adrienne Rich and others recognize the family as a unit of oppression of woman. In India women swear by the inter-relatedness in a family, which they find hard to give up. Shobha De’s women believe in the marriages of convenience with no obligation to emotional faithfulness and sexual fidelity. Marriage is redefined in her novels. In Socialite Evenings, Karuna feels that marriage subjugates and enslaves women. She defines marriage as “a skin allergy, an irritant all right”. But the kind of social circle to which Shobha De’s most of the women characters belong, marriage also becomes a necessity because it not only provides security, status and luxuries and also enables them to indulge in adultery. As in Socialite Evenings, Karuna calls her husband ‘a package deal’ containing an assured income which she had been enjoying.

Most of the characters portrayed by Shobha De are indulged in extra marital affairs. Marriage to them is hardly more than a convenient contract to lead a comfortable or promiscuous life. Women in her novels have no respect and regard for their husbands and there is no compatibility and understanding in their inter-personal
relationships. In *Snapshots*, for Swati and Aparna husband is “an awful and dirty word”; Reema uses her husband for material comfort. In *Sultry Days*, Pratimaben, who meets her businessman husband once a week, calls him her ‘weekend husband’.

In India, women have been conditioned by the religious and cultural myths so that they have acquired positive attitudes, virtues and qualities all through the ages. But there is a difference between Western myths like that of Eve and Pandora, in which women are depicted as temptresses and evil. In Indian mythical concepts of Sita, Savitri, Ahalya, Draupadi and others, the quality which is emphasized is their piety and chastity. They are never shown as evil in themselves, they are positive with emphasis on their qualities of courage of conviction and inner strength of their actions unlike the negative western myths that influence women negatively. Shobha De’s women are of western mould as they lack such positive qualities. Most of her women protagonists are selfish, shrewd and self-centred. These women are more conscious of their demands than their obligations. They seem prepared to dump the usual fascination for women i.e. dignity, morality and chastity. Shobha De’s women usually take up revolutionary roles and are keen to cherish their passion rather than observing the familial or social decorum usually expected of a woman.

In *Strange Obsession*, Minx is a lesbian, an eccentric who behaves like
a male, thoroughly deprived of womanliness. In *Snapshots*, all her women characters negate the norms of traditional female behaviour; Rashmi an unwed mother, Swati and Aparna are divorcees, Reema enjoys a relationship with her brother-in-law, Noor’s mother is man-crazy, Surekha has a more satisfying relationship with a woman. Swati considers man a ‘commodity’ and shows the negative and unacceptable side of female sexuality.

Another difference that moulds the outlook of the Indian feminists is the latent spiritual strength in Indian women that find expression in morally uplifting virtues. **M.K. Gandhi** during the independence struggle, called upon women to bring to the fore this underlying spiritual force and to contribute their mite to the independence movement. This 'stree-shakti' as he called it responded favourably and splendidly during the struggle. The same spiritual quality can become the inspiring force behind the feminist efforts that would help women to rise up and awaken their feminist consciousness. But this spiritual energy is lacking in the female characters of Shobha De. In *Starry Nights*, Aasha Rani tries to commit suicide after her rejection in love by Akshay Arora (a famous actor) and Abhijit Mehra (son of an industrialist). In the novel *Sisters*, Alisha knowingly leads an amorous life with a married person Dr. Kurien. Her involvement with this man is so deep that after her break-up, she becomes a drug-addict.
The next point of departure is in the attitude to motherhood and wifehood which are the basic roles that make up the life of a woman. One can find an essential difference between the Indian and western concept of motherhood. In the west, feminists like Adrienne Riche takes motherhood as a burden, as a weapon for enslaving and oppressing women. That’s why women fight for right against sexual politics and issues related to reproductive rights (cultural feminism). But in India, most women welcome motherhood that accords them much status in their families. In India, more importance is given to the role of a mother than that of a wife. Once she attains the stature of a mother, an Indian woman gives less importance to physical relations. The state of motherhood is exalted in Indian conditions, a mother is very much revered in India. Swami Vivekananda in ‘Women of India’ says,

*The ideal of womanhood in India is motherhood- that marvellous, unselfish, all suffering, ever-forgiving mother. The wife walks behind, the shadow.* He continues in his address to American women, *"In the west, the woman is wife"* 21

Shobha De’s women consider motherhood a burden, a barrier in their personal freedom. In the novel, *Sisters*, Mikki denies motherhood as she wants to keep herself fit and attractive for her husband Binny. In *Socialite Evenings*, when Karuna gets pregnant, her initial reaction was-“*What am I supposed to do now? I don’t want the bloody baby. I’ve
never wanted one-Krish’s or anyone else.” When her friend Anjali comes to know about her pregnancy she advises Karuna,

“Don’t be crazy....... A baby is a lifelong responsibility-look at me. Are you prepared to tie yourself down forever? Get a puppy or a kitten if you are feeling all that motherly, forget about a kid.”

Unlike, western feminist ideologies to the concept of liberation or personal freedom, Indian women don’t want to compete with men rather they want to extract as much convenience and individual freedom from their male partners as would satisfy them to keep on marital status successfully. Indian feminism has its own concept of a liberated woman, and this Indian variety of feminism is best suited to solve the issues before Indian women. A blind acceptance and adherence to western ideals of feminism is not the answer, though its influence on Indian society and literature cannot be avoided. But the feminism in India is deeply rooted in its traditional values which give it a different colour and taste than the West. Thus Indian feminism tries to find a place within the community and family relations in which a woman can seek for an identity within the circle of family and social acquaintances, by discharging the duties to those whom she owes. This is a feature unique to Indian feminism in which an Indian woman wants to succeed in her goal of liberation within the familial context.
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