Chapter I

1. Introduction: Gender Constraint and the Evolution of Feminism

One of the most significant social arrangements that control social relationships is status. Lindsey (2011) defines status as “a category or position a person occupies that is a significant determinant of how she or he will be defined and treated” (2). All societies classify members by status and then grade these statuses in some manner to create an arrangement of social stratification. Each social status has a specific social role associated with it. Roles are performed according to social standards and tradition that regulate people’s conduct in various social (as well as domestic) situations. When appropriate social roles are too strictly demarcated, individuals’ freedom of action is often hampered. Such strict social demarcations of roles lead to the creation of stereotypes - a false idea that all the people who belong to a particular social status share certain common characteristics. Stereotypes include both positive and negative characteristics; however, the negative traits associated with certain statuses usually become more popular and are used to rationalize the discrimination against the members of a given group.

Men and women are often stereotyped according to the characteristics they are supposed to possess by virtue of their biological constitution. For example, “women are stereotyped as flighty and unreliable because they possess uncontrollable raging hormones that fuel unpredictable emotional outbursts” (Lindsey, 2011: 3). Such negative stereotypes can result in sexism, the unjust treatment of people, especially women, because of their biological traits. Obviously, women are affected more severely by gender stereotypes. Compared to men, women more frequently find themselves occupying statuses that are
associated with less power, social respect and income. Beliefs about the inadequacies of women due to their physical nature are reinforced by various social elements and then used to rationalize the subjugation of women. Nevertheless, many sociologists agree that gender stereotypes restrain both men and women from realizing their full potential in personal and professional life.

Gender stereotypes have given rise to many social theories regarding the typical traits of men and women. For example, Clow (2011) discusses a gender theory in which agentic attributes (e.g., assertive, ambitious, dominant, independent, self-confident, and competitive) are central to perceptions of masculinity, whereas communal attributes (e.g., affectionate, helpful, kind, nurturing, sympathetic, and sensitive) are associated with perceptions of femininity. Because of the belief in the typical characteristics of men and women, when a man or a woman enters a profession that is conventionally associated with the opposite sex, there is a conflict. Men in inappropriate jobs are ‘feminized’, and the women in unfitting jobs are ‘masculinized.’ Because of the social stigma attached to being a gender misfit, most individuals decide to participate only in activities that are considered appropriate for their sex. Such separation forces men and women to participate in different activities, giving them different kinds of experiences and skills. This further strengthens gender stereotypes and limits the career possibilities for men and women. Most of the studies on gender stereotypes focus on women as the targets of gender discrimination; however, men are equally affected by it.

As children are socially conditioned to fulfill the roles which are considered appropriate for their gender, they are acquiring the skills necessary to be completely ‘males’ or ‘females.’ Complying with gender role expectations is believed to help individuals in
becoming successful and acceptable members of the society. Even today, gender-related divisions of labor are widely accepted all over the world. Parents motivate their children to develop a strong sense of gender-role identity; so that they can take their expected places in the adult society. This imperative had as its corollary the assumption that individuals who failed to develop a strong gender-role identification, or who rebelled against society’s normative expectations for their gender, were likely to be neurotic misfits. Therefore, men are considered inadequate when they perform tasks associated with social roles conventionally fulfilled by women. For example, men in communal professions such as nursing or day care have to encounter a great deal of social scorn. Similarly, women in professions such as politics and law enforcement are generally detested.

The belief that men and woman need to perform different social roles because of their physiological differences is called essentialism. According to Lindsey (2011), “although men are sometimes its targets, essentialism points to women’s biological and reproductive makeup that refrains them from standing on equal ground with men” (23). This essentialist sexism is perpetuated by the patriarchy, the male-dominated social system that leads to the subjugation of women. In a patriarchal social system, male-centered norms are the standards to which everyone has to adhere. The patriarchal system preserves the idea that gender roles are biologically determined and therefore unchangeable. This essentialist dogma is more prevalent in the developing world today. Many women in the developing world have been prevented from opportunities for education and professional development as it is strongly believed that women are biologically unsuitable for doing anything other than domestic chores. The same
essentialist beliefs have made men the custodians of the society. Men certainly occupy social positions which have more power and freedom. Even history has been recorded from a male perspective that ignores the other half of humanity. This perspective has strongly established the belief that the patriarchal supremacy is an inevitable part of humanity and gender equality is impracticable.

Functionalism is a school of thought that endorses essentialism. Functionalists argue that in preindustrial societies social equilibrium was maintained by assigning different roles to men and women. Since people in preindustrial societies had to depend on hunting and subsistence farming activities, role specialization according to gender was functionally inevitable. Men were assigned hunting roles and therefore they were away from home for long periods as their primary duty was to bring food to the family. Women, on the other hand, were assigned domestic roles that kept them near their home as they were limited by pregnancy and childbirth. They also had to take care of the children and the household. This functional division was strongly established in the society. Women might have been extremely successful and useful in the roles assigned to them, but they were dependent on men for food and protection. Because of this dependence, the roles assigned to men gradually came to be more valued than female roles. According to functionalism, men have instrumental role and they are expected to maintain the honor of the family by providing food and shelter and connecting the family to the outside world. On the other hand, women have expressive role and they are expected to provide emotional support to the members of the family and make sure that the household runs smoothly. Functionalists think that when there is an excessive deviation from these gender roles or when there is an excessive overlap, the family will crumble away.
“Advocates of functionalist assumptions argue, for instance, that gender role ambiguity
regarding instrumental and expressive roles is a major factor in divorce” (Lindsey,
2011: 6).

Even Freud’s theory of psychosexual development, the most influential and fundamental
type in human sexuality, seems to support essentialism as it excessively focuses on
human anatomy in order to explain the differences in male and female sexuality. Freud
argues that girls come to believe that the penis is a symbol of power denied to them. This
belief leads to “penis envy” which gradually makes a girl wish that she could be a boy.
The lack of a penis not only makes the girl feel inadequate as a person but also makes her
view her mother as inferior. As a result, the girl’s sexual energy is transferred to the
father who becomes the love-object. This is popularly known as Electra complex. Later
her sexuality improves when her wish for a penis is replaced by the wish for a child,
especially a male child who can bring with him the symbol of power. Her fascination for
motherhood helps her identify with her mother again and this change signifies her sexual
maturity. Similarly, a boy’s sexual energy is initially focused on his mother, and his
father is the rival for his mother’s affection. This is known as Oedipus complex. When
the boy comes to know that a girl does not have a penis, he develops “castration anxiety”
and fears that he may be deprived of the precious organ. This fear helps the boy develop
a strong superego. According to Freud, girls have weaker superegos since the main cause
of Electra complex is envy rather than fear. Freud uses this point to explain why women
are more envious, narcissistic and passive than men. On the whole, as Lindsey (2011)
observes, “anatomy is destiny for Freud” (29).
The belief that men and women are essentially different because of their biology and genes cannot foster gender equality. However, the situation is now much more encouraging for those who want to fight against the subjugation of women on the basis of their gender. The sudden increase in the research on gender issues has provided substantial evidence to prove that essentialist claims are untrue. It is now clearly understood that culture plays a more influential role in gender development than biology. In the light of modern sociological and psychological studies, the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ are now used in a more distinctive manner to refer to two different attributes. Sex refers to the biological features that make the male and female distinguishable. This definition encompasses chromosomal differences, anatomy, hormones, reproductive systems and other physiological characteristics. In contrast, gender refers to the psychological and sociocultural characteristics of males and females. This definition encompasses the effects of the society and culture on the personality of a person. In other words, sex determines maleness and femaleness, whereas gender determines masculinity and femininity. What makes this distinction revolutionary is the fact that “sex is an ascribed status because a person is born with it; but gender is an achieved status because it must be learned” (Lindsey, 2011:4). This means that gender is a social construct and not a biological destiny.

In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir made her groundbreaking statement in her book *The Second Sex*: “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (293). This statement had a strong influence on the feminist thinking. It still remains very influential among feminist and sociological researchers. It makes it very clear that gender is an aspect of identity gradually acquired. It has tremendously helped the age-old endeavor of women activists.
to expose the patriarchal claim that female inferiority is inevitable and her destiny is anatomy-bound. Regarding the instrumental role played by Simone de Beauvoir’s statement in shaping modern feminist ideology and gender studies, Judith Butler aptly remarks:

> With the distinction intact, it is no longer possible to attribute the values or social functions of women to biological necessity, and neither can we refer meaningfully to natural or unnatural gendered behavior: all gender is, by definition, unnatural. Moreover, if the distinction is consistently applied, it becomes unclear whether being a given sex has any necessary consequence for becoming a given gender. (35)

According to Judith Butler, the verb ‘becomes’ means not only that gender is a social construction but also that gender is a process of constructing ourselves. To become a woman is a purposeful and meticulous acquisition of acts and skills.

The sociocultural constitution of gender was further substantiated by many researchers. Margaret Mead, carried out extensive studies into gender development when she went to New Guinea in the 1930s and lived with three different tribes: Arapesh, Mundugumor and Tchumbuli (Quoted in Lindsey, 2011:24). Contrary to her belief that biology was the sole determinant of sexuality, Mead found that masculinity and femininity were culturally, rather than biologically, determined.

Consequently, the socialization process that men and women undergo to become appropriately masculine and feminine, has become a significant area of study in sociology, anthropology, psychology and feminism. In the current study, the socialization
process is also termed ‘gender socialization’ and ‘gender conditioning’. Since the 1970s, ethnomethodological approaches have been adopted by those wishing to explore how gender is achieved through social actions and interactions. An understanding of gender socialization is very crucial to know how a person, through his/her social interaction, learns to behave in a culturally appropriate way and becomes a functioning member of the society. From a feminist point of view, it also helps to understand how the various social and cultural elements work to mould females into ‘admirable and submissive’ feminine beings. This knowledge will equip them to fight the repressive social elements and to liberate females from the clutches of the patriarchal oppression.

Lindsey (2011) says, “From the moment a girl infant is wrapped in a pink blanket and a boy infant in a blue one, gender role development begins” (54). Brickell remarks that there is no authentic or ‘natural’ maleness or femaleness; the subject is gendered through various social practices. “Even the attributes of our bodies that we understand as ‘biological’ markers of sex –such as genitalia – hold no significance prior to social interaction. Instead, these acquire rich layers of meaning that render them crucial markers of social distinction” (2006:93). In other words, gender has no meaning outside the society. It is the society that makes gender differences palpable. “Our genders count because they are made to count in society, not because they existed in any essential sense before society” (Brickell, 2006:99).

Primary socialization, which begins in the family, helps a child acquire necessary skills, such as language, to fit into society. Continuing socialization, which happens outside home, provides the basis for the various social roles a person will perform throughout life. The culture provides a sort of social control to ensure that people more or less
comply with various social norms, including those related to gender. “Becoming a
gender is an impulsive yet mindful process of interpreting a cultural reality laden with
sanctions, taboos, and prescriptions” (Butler, 1986: 40). Sociocultural mechanisms that
ensure gender role conformity are mostly indiscernible but very effective, such as
mockery, rejection by peers, colleagues and family and marginalization. Boys who play
with dolls are ridiculed and girls who play aggressively are rejected. As already
mentioned, the adults who challenge workplace gender norms have to meet with a lot of
social resistance.

In her comprehensive book *Gender Roles: A Sociological Perspective*, Linda L. Lindsey
thoroughly examines various agents of socialization that facilitate gender conditioning.
They are very important from the point of view of feminist thinkers as they help them pin
down various social elements that women have to disengage themselves from. In the
novels of Margaret Atwood, the subject matter of this research work, the protagonists are
seen fighting against these agents of socialization to successfully redefine themselves.
Agents of socialization are the people, groups, and social institutions that provide the
critical information needed for children to become fully functioning members of society.
These agents do not exist independently of one another and are often inconsistent in the
gendered messages they send. The family is by far the most significant agent of
socialization. It continues to play the pivotal role in primary socialization. Learned first in
the family and then reinforced by other social institutions, gender is fundamental to the
shaping of all social life.

Children transfer gender role patterns established in the family when they begin to form
friendships with their peers. With family gender role models as a foundation, peer
influence on children’s gender socialization is even more powerful. Activities, games, and plays are strongly related to gender roles and become important aspects of socialization. Regardless of the mission to evaluate children impersonally—by what they do rather than who they are—schools are not immune to gender role stereotyping and often serve to foster it. Functionlists emphasize the responsibility of the schools to socialize children to eventually take on positions necessary to maintain society, unfortunately, many schools unwittingly socialize children into acquiring one set of values to the exclusion of the other. Stereotypical thinking assumes that in filling breadwinning roles, boys will need to be taught the value of competitiveness; in filling domestic roles, girls will need to be taught the value of nurturance. Though both are positive values and both are needed to function effectively, they are limited to, or truly accepted by, only one gender.

Since gender is found to be a social construct, many feminist thinkers and psychologists consider it a mere surface element which has no connection with a person’s inner psyche. In other words, it is a sort of covering which serves to make a person appear normal or even admirable. In the modern consumerist society, gender is a false and hollow element which is often in conflict with a person’s true self, thereby resulting in problems like split personality or neurosis. However, it is a pity that people are mostly judged by their gender behavior, a false self that people put on to satisfy social demands. “This creates an intense concentration on surface and on appearance, on the self as a set of images and roles, ‘self-presentation’ as the core reality of experience” (Frosh, 1991:66). In fact, according to psychoanalysis, what we know about overselves is only a twisted piece of truth. Underlying it are the rebellious actions of the unconscious. The fact that our
‘conscious’ self, the one we know about, is a false one is clearly explained by Frosh (1991):

The self is indeed a ‘construct’; the realization of this is one of the major advances of the modern movement. It is made up of bits of experience, of relations with others, of internalizations of social processes – of material which is ingested, digested, made part of the psychic body. From this the inner being of each person takes shape. The self is, therefore, distinctively social rather than inherited in a straightforwardly essentialist way. (183-4)

The obsession with gender role norms and peoples’ surface actions make a person ‘narcissistic.’ Narcissistic people are always concerned with social conformity and try to see themselves from others’ point of view. The pain of having to continuously adhere to social norms is described by Lasch as follows:

The repeated experience of uneasy self-scrutiny, of submission to expert judgement, of distrust of their own capacity to make intelligent decisions, either as producers or as consumers, colours people’s perceptions both of themselves and of the world around them….Both as a worker and as a consumer, the individual learns not merely to measure himself against others but to see himself through others’ eyes. (29)

Lasch feels that contemporary culture is not conducive to the formation of a deep and integrated sense of secure being, a self which is more than a collection of false images. Therefore, there is a deep sense of emptiness lying at the heart of contemporary culture and of the people who are part of it. What matters in the modern consumerist culture is a
person’s ability to conform to the outward social norms and to remain acceptable in the society. In other words, the contemporary culture makes people prisoners of gender. However, contrary to Lasch’s belief, the fixation with false gender role behavior has always existed in civilized human societies and cannot be ascribed only to contemporary consumerist social system. Nevertheless, one can say that the agents of socialization, the causes of gender conditioning, have now become much more operational and inescapable due to technological and social developments, making the contemporary society more susceptible to gender stereotypes.

Judith Butler propagated the idea that our gender or the ‘conscious’ self was a false one. Her *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution (1988)* suggests that the ‘gendered’ self is better understood as a socially negotiated ‘performance’ than an innate quality. One would agree that certain kinds of acts or mannerisms are considered typical of a particular gender as they conform to an expected gender identity. Gender is real only to the extent that it is performed. Distinct gender behavior is not only a survival strategy but also an element that refines individuals to make them suitable for the contemporary culture. As a matter of fact, performing one’s gender wrong is discouraged with various social punishments and performing it well gives a person social acceptance. When most of the people succumb to social pressure and perform their gender well, it creates a false impression that there is an essentialism in gender identity. “Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis” (Butler, 1988:522). Judith Butler goes so far as to compare gender behavior to stage performance. “Gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors whomake use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once
again” (526). Further, Judith Butler relates: “Although theatrical performances can meet with political censorship and scathing criticism, gender performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions” (527).

It is very clear that gender roles are the expected attitudes and behaviors that a society associates with each sex. These gender roles constitute a person’s gendered self which is different from his/her inner self. In a narcissistic society where people are constantly pressured to comply with gender norms, there is only a slim chance for people to be conscious of their inner self, which is free from all the social conditioning. This inner self is often referred to as a person’s true identity or self in feminist and psychological theories. Gender conditioning is so strong and devious that a person’s true identity usually never surfaces. Gender conditioning is very devious and covert since it is not a linear progression. Indeed, “the origin of gender is not temporally discrete because gender is not originated at some point in time after which it is fixed in form” (Butler, 1986: 39). Owing to its furtive nature, gender conditioning is very powerful. In fact, it is so powerful that most people feel deeply humiliated if they are told that they are not really manly or womanly. Since social existence needs a clear-cut gender identity, it is not usually possible to exist outside of established gender norms. Any rebellious and firm person who voluntarily discards his/her ‘gendered’ self in an attempt to recover his/her true inner self has to go through a lot of social and psychological obstacles. Such a spiritual journey towards one’s true self is generally known as ‘quest for selfhood’ in feminist ideology.

Psychoanalysis seems to be an apt method to analyze the condition of narcissistic society and individuals’ struggle to break away from social restrictions to become free individuals. A psychoanalytic study aims at examining a person’s whole self. According
to Frosh (1991), “in psychoanalysis, it is the subjectivity of the individual which is the
centre of concern, a subjectivity given not just by what can be easily expressed as a
consciously available ‘I’, but also by obscure and contradictory segments of a hidden
self” (2). By carefully analyzing the nature of ‘self,’ psychoanalysis tries to see the
nature of the cultural order. “More generally, psychoanalysis is here being used not only
to show how social conditions produce internal mental states and organizations of various
kinds, but also to supply criteria by which modern social experience can be evaluated”
(Frosh, 1991:5).

The main aim of gender norms is to maintain gender within its binary frame; masculine
and feminine. This gender dichotomy, inevitably, fosters a rivalry for supremacy. As
discussed earlier, though both men and women are restricted by the gender role
expectations, women’s social position, undeniably, is much more pathetic than that of
men. All gender roles entail rights and responsibilities. However, both men and women
view the position of men as enviable and desirable. “Men have careers; women have jobs.
Men are breadwinners; women are bread bakers. Men are sexual leaders; women are
sexual followers” (Lindsey, 2011:241). Feminism is based on the understanding that
patriarchy systematically subjugates women on biological grounds. Patriarchy privileges
men by considering the male body as the ‘standard’ and associating with it all positive
characteristics, such as good health, strength, reason and so on. On the other hand, using
the misconceptions about women’s reproductive capacity, a matchless biological feature
that is fundamental to the sustenance of human society, the male-dominated social system
associates with the female body deficiencies,such as illness, weakness, unreliable,impulsiveness and so on.
People who shaped western thought, such as Aristotle and Kant, considered women physically and morally inferior and excluded them from active political life. Women therefore were confined to familial and conjugal responsibilities. Owing to its patriarchal foundation, even the modern western society, which looks very liberal, inhibits women from realizing their full potential. As for Indian philosophy, the principles of Manu are very influential. “The creator, says Manu, allotted to women a love of bed, of their seat and of ornaments, impure desires, wrath, dishonesty, malice and bad conduct” (Quoted in Singh, 1994: 95). This (intentionally, perhaps) ignores the fact that men can also be susceptible to these defects. Women, therefore, need to be strongly protected (by men of course) from falling prey to their own weaknesses. As a result, they are made to channelise their intense energy into domestic chores. “The household chores constitute a social justification for her birth and existence” (Singh: 96).

Besides, the patriarchal society has unrealistic expectations of women, creating a persistent sense of inadequacy in women’s minds. For example, in a traditional Indian situation, a man seeks to marry only the basically ‘good’ woman. The ingredients that he looks for in his would-be wife are: virtue, devotion, faithfulness, purity, beauty and the ability to sacrifice. The woman is expected to possess all these qualities without expecting anything in return from him. This implies that the patriarchal society has to guarantee to groom and train girls to possess all these virtues, which are not just merits but a gender necessity. The right of man to satisfy his sexual desires is socially justified, but woman is imprisoned in her home. “Patriarchal civilization condemned woman to a chastity [...] if she ‘gives in’ or if she ‘falls,’ she arouses disdain, whereas even the blame inflicted on her vanquisher brings him admiration” (Beauvoir: 397). Overall, the unfair
social system does not allow woman to live with her human imperfection. To be a woman is to force the body to comply with an historical idea of ‘woman’ and to become a cultural sign. This means there are numerous social constraints on women. It is interesting to note that patriarchy, besides directly imposing those constraints on women, craftily institutes a matriarchal control system to groom young girls for their subservient adult roles. This matriarchal control system usually consists of mothers, aunts, sisters, grandmothers and girl friends who have already been assimilated into the patriarchal system. As ardent followers of the traditional gender norms, these women frequently become much more oppressive than men. Atwood thinks that such a matrilineal control within the patriarchal system is based on the history of imperialism. “For example, the British in India raised an army of Indians to control the rest of the Indians…So, if you want to control women, you have to grant some women a tiny bit more power so that they’ll control the others” (Quoted in Johnson, 2004: 69).

Humanity is male and women are defined only in relation to men. Women are not considered independent beings. The ‘male’ humanity has always tried to escape from its destiny with its inventiveness and determination, whereas maternity has not allowed women to escape from their biological destiny. Indeed, no one can elucidate women’s dependent and subordinate position in the world better than Simone de Beauvoir:

Parents still raise their daughters for marriage rather than promoting their personal development; and the daughter sees so many advantages that she desires it herself; the result is that she is often less specialized, less solidly trained than her brothers, she is less totally committed to her profession; as such, she is doomed to remain inferior in it; and the vicious circle is
knotted; this inferiority reinforces her desire to find a husband [...] Men’s economic privilege, their social value, the prestige of marriage, the usefulness of masculine support – all these encourage women to ardently want to please men. They are on the whole still in a state of serfdom. It follows that woman knows and chooses herself not as she exists for herself but as man defines her. She thus has to be described first as men dream of her since her being-for-men is one of the essential factors of her concrete condition. (158-159)

Undeniably, even the recent economic and professional autonomy of women in developed countries has not significantly improved women’s situation. Thus, from the origins of humanity, men’s biological privilege enabled them to establish themselves as autonomous subjects. On the other hand, a woman’s social position is assigned only by men. A woman has never imposed her own social rule. In short, “he is the subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other” (6).

Nevertheless, the fact that women’s subordinate position is a creation of the male-dominated society and not a ‘preordained’ one offers potential for women liberation. The main task of women liberation or feminist movement is to change the mindset of the patriarchal society and to facilitate women’s liberation from male domination and gender misconceptions. Since traditional moral theories have legitimized the oppression of women on moral and physiological grounds, women activists are in a position to look for new theories with which they can prove that the subjugation of women is morally and politically unacceptable. Since biology is commonly used by patriarchy to subordinate women, women activists need to encourage women to move to ‘consciousness’ to escape
the limitations of their body. Since biological shortcomings are inevitable. The feminists’ prime aim should be to prove that gender is socially constructed and that positive traits like reason, intelligence, perseverance, courage, level-mindedness and so on are common to both men and women. “Since within contemporary Western societies gender relations have been one of domination, feminist theories should have a compensatory as well as a critical aspect. That is, they need to recover and explore the aspects of social relations that have been suppressed, unarticulated, or denied within dominant (male) viewpoints (Flax, 1987:641). Gender, therefore, is a crucial element in feminist theories. It helps feminist thinkers spell out that behavior and attitude are not biologically determined but socially constructed and therefore, women, if right social conditions are created, can be men’s equals. Feminist theorists can significantly contribute to women liberation by focusing clearly on the social processes and cultural factors that condition men and women to behave in certain ways. Feminist writers can play a useful role in the emancipation of women by creating female characters who gradually and decisively disengage themselves from the systematic social oppression. They can also expose the falsity of gender dichotomy by creating and popularizing true-to-life male and female characters with atypical gender role behaviors, such as subservient men and aggressive women.

Feminism derives its basic tenets from Marxist concepts of social inequality and class domination. However, instead of focusing on social class and economic issues, feminism deals with the patriarchal oppression of women. Feminists recognize that patriarchal oppression “plays a role in the formation of consciousness, and in the maintenance of sexist behavior as well as in such concrete institutional arrangements as the division of
labor”(Todd, 1988: 5). Feminists believe that the powerful patriarchal system can be challenged only when women gain resources necessary to do so. For many feminist scholars, the traditional male-dominated family is the major location for the oppression of women. The aim of feminism is to try in various ways to increase women’s empowerment in order to help them have control over their own destinies.

Simone de Beauvoir suggests a sensible feminist objective. By saying that one ‘becomes’ a woman through various sociocultural processes, she seems also to hint at the possibility of a ‘return journey,’ a gradual recovery from the effects of sociocultural conditioning. What she means is a complete abandonment of gender dichotomy. Simone de Beauvoir thinks that a woman is in a terrible predicament within the gender system. To be a woman in patriarchal sense is to be ‘the other,’ whereas to be a man in patriarchal sense is to be an oppressor. Either way, a woman ends up feeling alienated. Since both options are artificial creations of the male-dominated society, the only way for a woman to be free is to reject the gender system and seek self-fulfillment in “transcendence.” On the gender-free model of liberation proposed by Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler comments: “It seems that Beauvoir prescribes the overcoming of gender altogether, especially for women, for whom becoming one's gender implies the sacrifice of autonomy and the capacity for transcendence” (43).

Feminism is a worldwide movement to end the patriarchal oppression of women. It tries to achieve its purpose by empowering women. However, ‘feminism’ is an umbrella term for a variety of different rebellious strategies which aim at challenging the patriarchal authority. Since patriarchal oppression and women’s subordinate position in the society can be interpreted in different ways, there are different schools of feminist thought.
Liberal feminism, also called mainstream feminism, is considered to be the most moderate feminist school of thought. Liberal feminists think that women are prevented from participating in public life because of the misconception about women’s intellectual and physical inferiority. As a result, the talents of many women go unrecognized and unused. This school of thought spells out that women will be liberated only when they are given equal educational and civil rights. It is based on the simple idea that men and women are created equal and should not be denied equality of opportunity because of gender. Since it believes that both genders benefit by the elimination of sexism, men are also considered its members. As Lindsey points out, “Liberal feminism is based on Enlightenment beliefs of rationality, education, and the natural rights that extend to all men and women” (14).

Marxist feminism is based on the writings of Karl Marx (1818-1883) who condemns capitalism for flourishing on a class-based system that gives all the power to few men of the ruling class (bourgeoisie) who own factories and other resources that working class people (proletariat) rely on for their subsistence. Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), one of Marx’s associates, applies Marx’s principles to the family and gender politics. According to him, primitive societies were classless since there were no surplus goods and private property. However, the beginning of capitalist institutions gave rise to social divisions and the exploitation of weaker sections by powerful sections. The women’s household labor was considered inferior to the procurement of material goods by men. Marxist feminists think that household is a totalitarian system and the authority of the husband is unquestioned. Women are treated as property owned by men. Marxist feminism, as Praphakar (1999) notes, “advocates that economic independence of women is a
prerequisite for their equality and liberation and true equality of women is possible only in a socialist order”(17).

Marxist feminism has also resulted in social feminist theory which accuses class-based capitalism of keeping women in inferior position. In other words, it is based on the assumption that sexism and capitalism are mutually supportive. Socialist feminists believe that women can achieve emotional freedom only by means of economic independence. As long as a woman is afraid of losing her economic security, she can never challenge her husband’s power over her. The only way to achieve gender equality, according to this school of feminist thought, is to eliminate capitalism as it encourages economic oppression and sexism. What needs to be understood here is that socialist feminists do not deal only with male domination but with the unfair institutions and practices of the entire society.

Radical feminism is a strong form of feminism. While Marxist feminists focus on economic oppression of women, radical feminists are concerned with the sexual oppression. Unlike Marxism, which tries to challenge the entire social system, radical feminism targets only men for their domineering nature. Praphakar(1999) points out that this theory is chiefly concerned with the issues arising out of ‘pornography, prostitution, sexual harassment, rape and woman battering’ (18). It is based on the idea that women’s sexuality is controlled for male pleasure. Women’s oppression arises from male domination and therefore men are the real problem and not the entire social system. Radical feminists strongly believe that women can achieve freedom only when they create separate institutions that are women centered. “A society will emerge where the female virtues of nurturance, sharing, and intuition will dominate in a woman-identified
world” (Lindsey, 2011:16). Radical feminism seems to cover different kinds of extremist subversive policies. One is to ‘create an exclusively female sexuality through celibacy, auto-eroticism, or lesbianism’ (Prakahar, 1999:18). Another way is to rejoice at women’s bodies and their ability to create and nurture. In this way, motherhood is celebrated. Some radical feminists say that men are jealous and afraid of women’s reproductive power and that their biology is not their destiny but a resource. Some proponents of this school of thought even associate female self with the wild, undomesticated nature. However, radicalism is often criticized as it sometimes recommends complete rejection of family and heterosexuality. Moreover, it isolates women from the society rather than integrating them into it.

“Psychoanalytic feminist theory is an interpretative theory of the social construction of femininity and masculinity on the basis of the findings in social sciences, and psychoanalysis” (Prakahar, 1999:18). It is mainly concerned with ways in which social and cultural elements result in the formation of an individual’s identity. In other words, it is based on sociological and psychological conceptions of the impacts of the society on a woman’s mind. As Stephen Frosh (1991) points out, psychoanalytic feminist theory aims at creating a descriptive language “of the unconscious, of the impulses, anxieties, wishes and contradictory desires that are structured and restructured by our immersion in the social order” (2). This school of feminist thought believes that the social processes that lead to the formation of a woman’s sense of self can be systematically studied. This school of thought aims at helping women to gradually disengage their psyche from the effects of social conditioning to be emotionally free.
According to Praphakar (1999), existentialist feminism explains comprehensively women’s oppression embedded in ‘Otherness.’ Simone de Beauvoir has contributed significantly to the existentialist feminist philosophy. In her book *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that woman is oppressed because of her ‘otherness.’ She clearly explains that woman is defined and established as the ‘other’ because she is not man. This school of thought believes that the gender system favours. It makes man the subject, the free decision-making being, and woman the object, the “Other.” By making woman the object, the patriarchal society oppresses her physiologically and emotionally. According to this school of thought, the only way for a woman to be liberated from the clutches of the male-dominated social system is to transcend the patriarchal definitions, labels and gender identity and become a self, a subject.

The primary concern of postmodern feminism is to challenge the validity of the traditional male-centered literary conventions. According to this school of thought, women can fight against male oppression by subverting the conventional literary modes created by the male-dominated social system, because they believe that the misconceptions about women are sustained mainly by male literary conventions. Therefore, postmodern feminist thinkers (Julia Kristeva, for example) urge women to develop a distinct feminine writing style to change the male-defined world and to achieve freedom from oppressive thought. In other words, woman must write herself by putting into words her ‘otherness.’ The feminine literary modes, according to postmodern feminism, should be based on female sexuality and physiological nature. The strongly established male views can be gradually dismantled only when women start writing in a uniquely feminine style to provide a predominantly female perspective on life.
Intense environmental consciousness makes some women think about the patriarchal oppression of women. For these women, the destruction of the ecosystem is related to the degradation and the oppression of women. Ecofeminists believe that men, due to their exploitative and domineering nature, are the cause of degradation of the earth and its people. “Drawing on earth-based spiritual imagery, ecofeminism suggests that the world’s religions have an ethical responsibility to challenge a patriarchal system of corporate globalization that is deepening the impoverishment of the earth and its people. The planet can be healed and ecological harmony restored through political action emphasizing the principle of equality of all species” (Lindsey, 2011: 17).

The subject of this doctoral thesis is to study the ‘gendered’ behavior of some significant characters in the fiction of Atwood. The main objective of the research is to thoroughly examine how various elements in the patriarchal social system work to condition men and women to behave in certain ways and how certain individualistic and perceptive characters in Atwood’s novels, especially her female protagonists, gradually disengage themselves from the effects of social conditioning and set themselves on a journey to selfhood. Atwood’s novels have been chosen for the research for various important reasons. Firstly, her characters are true-to-life. They accurately represent the limitless intricacies and peculiarities of human behavior. Secondly, her novels have characters which occupy various ‘gendered’ positions, offering rich material for gender analysis. There are submissive victims, aggressive oppressors, sly manipulators, androgynous men, oppressive women and so on. This gender diversity in Atwood’s novels proves not only the power of the gender system but also exposes its falsities. Thirdly, Atwood’s realism makes her feminist approach go beyond all conceptual
categorization and the descriptive power of theory. Therefore, each of her female protagonists is unique and employs different types of subversive strategies. This shows that Atwood’s feminist ideology is an interesting synthesis of various feminist philosophies. This enables one to see how different feminist concepts actually work in social situations, besides helping to understand the flaws in various feminist standpoints. Fourthly, the human relationships portrayed in Atwood’s novels are wide-ranging and exceed the issues addressed by feminism. Her novels focus not only on the relations between men and women, but also between women and women, mothers and daughters, sisters, little girls and so on. This helps one to understand how power politics work in various gender relationships. Finally, despite the fact that Atwood’s narrative style is unique in every novel and her postmodernism defies clear explanation and classification, it is possible to discern certain basic features common to most of her novels, such as the use of childhood memories to make sense of the present problems, female protagonists who are initially submissive, and later become domineering and selfish male characters who subjugate the female protagonists, repressive women who uphold patriarchal values, strange psychological escape strategies, etc. Such perceptible narrative patterns in her novels clearly reveal her distinctive feminist ideology, thereby making this feminist research viable.