Chapter One

Between Self and Community: Contexts of Multiculturalism
Introduction

The objective of this project is to appreciate and analyze the fiction produced by the immigrant Parsee writers of the Indian subcontinent; Rohinton Mistry, Bapsi Sidhwa and Boman Desai. These writers of Indian origin immigrated to Canada and USA in the latter half of the 20th century. It makes an interesting study, from the multicultural context, to examine the works of these diasporic writers, as they observe from a vantage point of distance, taking cognizance of the position of their own community, in the past as well as in the present. The dislocation of the Parsees from Persia, their home country and their relocation in India has become a thing of the distant past, history. In fact, they are now so firmly rooted in their host country that they feel a sense of belonging to India, almost their 'second home’. The expatriate Parsees, relocated to Canada, USA or any other country, for that matter, struggle to settle down like any Asian immigrants; in their ‘third home’ now. The Parsees who are more concentrated in the west India, mostly in Gujarat and Bombay and also in Pakistan, and are considered as Indians or Pakistanis or south Asians all over the world, have a very distinct history of their diaspora and generate keen interest in their cultural identity, especially, against the backdrop of the multicultural Indian social situation and also the global context of multiculturalism that emerged recently during the last three decades of the twentieth century.

Multiculturalism -- Definition and Theory:

Cultural pluralism is not a modern phenomenon. History provides many examples of different communities and cultures living side by side within the same society, co-existing peacefully and sometimes, even amicably. Like the cultural diversity of the empires of Persia, Egypt and Rome, in India too, people of diverse religions and languages have lived together for several centuries. For a very long time, such societies have been multi-religious, multi-lingual and multi-cultural, often equated with multi-ethnic in public discourse. However, the existence of plurality at the societal level does not imply that multiculturalism as a value prevailed in these societies. The simultaneous presence of many cultures and communities within the same social space points to a plural social fabric, but it does not betoken the presence
of multiculturalism. The latter entails something more than the mere presence of different communities or the attitude of tolerance in society. Multiculturalism is concerned with the issue of equality; it asks whether the different communities, living peacefully together, co-exist as equals in the public arena. It is this emphasis on equality that distinguishes multiculturalism from pluralism (Mahajan, 2002: 11).

Going beyond Pluralism, multiculturalism makes a value-statement and asserts that diverse cultural communities present in our society, may be different in religion, race or caste, must live as equals and have equal status in the public domain. Despite the peaceful co-existence, the dominance of the majority community is frequently expressed in political and cultural terms in such plural societies. Contemporary discourses on multiculturalism have brought home the reality that inequalities of some kind may prevail even after some basic degree of political and civil rights are granted to all. Having the basis of egalitarian principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, the concept of multiculturalism fits well within the framework of the democratic polity. Democracy values the principle of non-discrimination. It aims to ensure that the socially ascribed identities, such as those of race, caste, religion or gender, are not the sources of discrimination and disadvantage in the public domain. As a political theory, multiculturalism extends this democratic concern and probes areas of cultural discrimination that may exist even after legal equality has been established. Reflecting upon the just and equal treatment for the minority cultures and communities within the nation-state, multiculturalism is concerned about and takes care of the liberal egalitarian values and their praxis.

Generally there is a confusion arising from the different range of references of the two terms ‘multicultural’ and ‘multiculturalism’, which though similar in appearance carry very different associations. ‘Multicultural’ points to the visible and universally accessible products of cultural diversity – food, clothes, music, theatre, and sometimes special occupations. It has a very positive resonance as multicultural societies add to the colour and variety of lifestyles available to people making their choices wider as consumers. Explaining the term ‘multicultural’, Stuart Hall writes that it describes the social characteristics and problems of governance posed by any society in which different communities live together and attempt to build a common life while retaining something of their ‘original’ identity (Hall, 2000: 209).
‘Multiculturalism’ on the other hand, when it is not simply the noun from ‘multicultural’, has deeper philosophical and political implications of the coexistence of different orientations to engagement with the world, and the way in which these differences strive for equal recognition within national and global boundaries, sometimes in relative harmony with each other, sometimes in real conflict (Watson, 2002: 6-8). According to Hall, ‘multiculturalism’ is substantive. It refers to the strategies and policies adopted to govern or manage the problems of diversity and multiplicity generated by multi-cultural societies. It is usually used in singular, signifying the distinctive philosophy or doctrine which underpins multi-cultural strategies. ‘Multi-cultural’, however, is by definition plural. There are many kinds of multicultural societies. The USA, Canada, Britain, France, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, New Zealand, Indonesia, South Africa, and Nigeria – all qualify. They are ‘multicultural’ in significantly different ways. However, they all share one characteristic. They are by definition culturally heterogeneous. The two terms are now so interdependent that it is virtually impossible to disentangle them. However, ‘multiculturalism’ presents specific difficulties. It stands for a wide range of social articulation, ideals and practices.

Another way of looking at the usage of the two terms is, not to focus upon their semantic range, however, but to note how ‘multicultural’ can be linked to a perspective which has the individual at its centre, whereas ‘multiculturalism’ compels us to think through the social and collective dimensions of diversity. This dichotomy has special relevance for the liberal democracies especially in the western countries, where governance commences from the proposition that the aim of the State must be to limit the restrictions on individual action to the minimum, since the ultimate goal of development must be the maximization of the potential of the individual. In this view, the laws, structures and institutions of the State are, or should be, designed solely to enhance the possibility of individual freedom. Understandably, then, the additional dimension of individual choice which the word ‘multicultural’ suggests is welcome. From the other perspective, emphasis may be less on the individual achievement as the ultimate goal, and more on the creation of the collective well-being of the community. The approach would not be individualistic but communitarian. ‘Different but equal’ is the leitmotif of multiculturalism. While living with differences is a fact of our social existence, multiculturalism reflects upon the status of different cultural
communities within a polity. It has only been very recently that, as a consequence of the dramatic effects of increased global mobility, liberal democracies have had to take account of a heterogeneity which challenges that basic focus on the individual and hence, the very basis of liberalism itself. It is here that ‘multiculturalism’ rather than ‘multicultural’ becomes significant, and this provides the justification for the extension of the discussion to include issues of identity, ethnicity, religion and nationalism. Multiculturalism, in this broader sense, is a relatively new coinage but under different guises its implications have long been matters of direct concern to post-colonial nations where diversity and heterogeneity have been the rule rather than the exception.

Multiculturalism, as distinct from the adjective ‘multicultural’, first came into wide circulation in the early 1970s in Canada and Australia as the name for a government policy to assist in the management of ethnic pluralism within the national polity. In this context, the emergence of the term is strongly associated with a growing realization of the unintended social and cultural consequences of large-scale immigration. Coined by the Canadian Royal Commission in 1965, multiculturalism is widely supported and endorsed by its proponents as both a progressive political imperative and an official article of faith – a term associated in principle with the values of equality, tolerance and inclusiveness towards migrants of ethnically different backgrounds (Bennet, Grossberg and Morris, 2005: 226). Multiculturalism ensures that all citizens can keep their identities, can take pride in their ancestry and have a sense of belonging. It is a social doctrine that distinguishes itself as a positive alternative for policies of assimilation and homogenization, connoting a politics of recognition of the citizenship rights and cultural identities of ethnic minority groups and, more generally, an affirmation of the value of cultural diversity.

It has become a new buzz word of this century, not only profusely used by the sociologists and political scientists but also by the literary critics as literature is after all, a reflection of social reality. Although multiculturalism as a phenomenon has already existed in all societies since hardly any community can boast of being entirely mono-cultural, mono-religious or mono-racial, no matter how secluded or xenophobic it is. In the last few decades this term has gained inimitable significance as a consequence of the unprecedented social globalization that has taken place. Global
society has been transformed by the myriad border-crossings as people migrated incessantly all over the world in search of a new life, either by choice or by force as exile. The developed countries like America, Australia, Canada and some European countries have stood in the past century, as an icon of ‘better life’ and freedom and have consequently been the final destination for many immigrants; even some immigrating from the colonizing countries. The flow has been mainly from the East to the West, from the Second and the Third World countries to the First World countries. The process gave rise to the cross-cultural inter/intra-actions and hence the quest for identity. This global phenomenon has made the literary and cultural critics rethink the concepts of nationhood and national identity and also interrogate and theorize the contemporary forms of movement, displacement or dislocation – Diasporas settled in the new lands.

Diaspora, Paul Gilroy reminds us, “is an ancient word” (Gilroy, 1994: 207) but its new currencies in global discourses confound the once clearly demarcated parameters of geography, national identity and belonging. Etymologically derived from the Greek term “diasperian”, ‘dia’- meaning ‘across’ and ‘-sperian’ meaning “to sow or scatter seeds”, diaspora can perhaps be seen as a naming of the other which has historically referred to displaced communities of people who have been dislocated from their native homeland through the movements of migration (forced), immigration (voluntary) or emigration (political exile) (Braziel and Mannur, 2003: 1). First used to describe the Jews living in exile from the homeland of Palestine, the term ‘Diaspora’, then, has religious significance to describe the plight of Jews living outside of Palestine. Diaspora suggests a dislocation from the nation-state or geographical location of origin and relocation in one or more nation-states, territories or countries. In his scholarly work on diaspora, Robin Cohen draws upon William Safran to delineate various features of diaspora (Cohen, 2008: 17). These features are:

1. dispersal from an original homeland often traumatically;
2. expansion from a homeland in search of work;
3. a collective memory and myth about the homeland including its location, history, suffering and achievement;
4. an idealization of the real or imagined ancestral home;
5. the frequent development of a return movement to the homeland;
6. a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history and cultural and religious heritage;
7. a troubled relationship with host societies suggesting a lack of acceptance;
8. a sense of empathy and co-responsibility with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement where home has become more vestigial;
9. the possibility of a distinctive, creative and enriching life in host countries with a tolerance of pluralism.

While discussing four phases of diaspora studies Cohen classifies the diasporas into five types. The first is the victim diaspora that includes the Jews, Africans and Armenians. The second is the labour diaspora of the indentured Indians. The third is the Imperial one of the British. The fourth is the trade diaspora consisting of the Chinese and the Labanese. The fifth is that of the deterritorialized people comprising the Caribbean peoples, Sindhis and the Parsees (Cohen, 2008: 18).

The community under study here, the Parsees, since their arrival in India almost a millennium ago, have been in a forced diaspora to avoid the religious persecution by the Arabs. In the latter part of the 20th century, many Parsees, among the many skilled and educated Indians have immigrated to the West, i.e. Europe, USA, Canada. This is a voluntary migration but diaspora poses its own problems and anxieties of identity for this doubly diasporic community. The novels under study reflect the anxiety and crisis of their identity right from the pre-colonial time to the post-colonial and post-modern time of today. Due to the marginal existence of this miniscule minority community in India so far, the Parsees are considered as Indians/Pakistanis among the Asian diaspora which constitute a large group of the diasporic population in the West. The crisis of their identity emerges when they would prefer to be recognized as ‘Parsees’ rather than as Indians, Pakistanis or South Asians.

The dynamism of the whole problem leads to a number of queries regarding the clash of cultures and civilizations, families and communities, castes, religions, languages, ethnicity, gender etc. Even the personal and the national histories work to form a new identity. A new present is reconstructed recovering from the past. Resulting from all this, a new identity-politics is created. For immigrants who bring with them their own concept of culture and try to find a place for it in the new society even as they try to
absorb and belong to the new culture; it is often very hard to handle the “culture-shock” received by them. Striding two cultures, they are confronted with a predicament often confusing. Their tribulations arise from the decisions of how much to merge with or adopt; what to reject or exclude or whether to simply co-exist with different cultures in order to maintain their own ‘identity’. There arises a complex issue of imparted identity and acquired identity for the diasporic societies. The issue becomes much more complex when there are not two but ‘multi’ cultures in a particular society. And hence, the dichotomy of ‘centre’ and ‘margin’ as the question becomes politicized and turns into a game of power or domination. The theory of multiculturalism is integrally connected with the theory of identity.

Multiculturalism can be best viewed neither as a political doctrine nor as a philosophic theory of man and the world but as a perspective on human life. According to Bhikhu Parekh, a multicultural perspective is composed of the creative interplay of these three complementary insights, namely the cultural embeddedness of human beings, the inescapability and desirability of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, and the internal plurality of each other (Parekh, 2006: 338). To appreciate the value of other cultures, any culture first needs to appreciate the plurality within it. Self-criticism and readiness to have a ‘dialogue’ with itself are the pre-requisites for such intercultural dialogues. Cultural diversity is a central feature of the social life of most of the nation-states today. Yet their public philosophies and public policies tend to be governed by a monocultural, assimilationist, homogenizing or majoritarian perspective, rather than by a multicultural perspective. The United States of America is an apt example of this tendency. In America, there is an amalgamation of different national stocks. America has Asian-Americans, African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Arab-Americans and many others. Each of these peoples came one after the other and has been accepted as a part of the larger democratic nation-state. Taking note of the same, C. W. Watson analyses the difference between assimilation and integration (Watson, 2002: 3-4). The alternative to any attempt to create a monocultural society is to celebrate and encourage multiculturalism in the expectation that citizens who are proud of their culture and see that culture being endorsed by the state will be anxious to join in common citizenship with members of other cultural groups to protect the liberal tolerance which is so important for them. In such a perspective the enhancement of a sense of local belonging and an awareness of
diversity paradoxically encourage a strong commitment to national goals and institutions. The term ‘integration’ is frequently used to distinguish this policy from one of assimilation, but it should be observed that there is still a confusion surrounding the two terms, with ‘integration’ occasionally employed to suggest ‘assimilation’ which itself used to mean a benevolent incorporation of diversity within the unity of the nation. The latter part of this chapter deals with these terms in detail.

Watson helps to understand the different thinking underlying these two strategies for dealing with the existence of several cultures within the nation by explaining the analogy of the ‘melting-pot’ to refer to the process of assimilation. Originally coined by the Anglo-Jewish writer Israel Zangwill in his play of the same name, produced in New York in 1908, the term referred to the manner in which immigrants who came to the United States at the end of the nineteenth century were encouraged to think of themselves as Americans, gradually abandoning their cultures of origin until; as in the action of the melting pot, they eventually became fully a part of the bright new alloy. Through a process of assimilation, then, facilitated by the State, all develop into Americans sharing a single common culture. By contrast, when in the period from the late 1960s onwards social philosophy began to change and doubts were cast on not only the descriptive power of the analogy – clearly different cultural groups were not simply abandoning their original cultural characteristics – but also its desirability, the culinary analogy which emerged to take account of the new circumstances was that of a “salad-bowl”. In the bowl, different constituents retain their distinctive flavours and forms but the dish as a whole is recognizably “Sui Generis”, having its own distinctive character as a result of its unique blending. These comparisons of the ‘melting-pot’ and the ‘salad-bowl’ help us both to imagine the difference between assimilation and integration and, by extending the analogy, to appreciate the positive advantages which contemporary governments hope to gain from celebrating rather than suppressing diversity. Earlier, the expatriates gave in to the process of acculturation by the hegemonic pressures of the West or that of Americanization in the case of USA. To take further the culinary metaphor, as used by Boman Desai in his Asylum USA, the ‘American Stew’ is becoming browner and browner with more and more Asians and Africans pouring in (88). The First World’s homogeneous policies were met with resistance and the policy of multiculturalism came into existence in the public and political arena. The shift towards an endorsement of
multiculturalism has not occurred uniformly throughout the world and is still rejected by nations which feel that their fragile unity is threatened by demands for cultural equality from minority groups. Why and how this perspective of multiculturalism is to be adopted is the subject of discourse for many social and political scientists as well as the scholars of cultural studies.

The debates concerning minority rights, identity and multiculturalism need to be contextualized within specific socio-cultural and historical settings instead of getting locked up in the theoretical impasse created by the endless debate between the liberals and the communitarians regarding individual rights and community-based group rights. Certain theoretical formulations have emerged from within both the liberal and the communitarian schools of thought in order to grapple with the existing situation in the countries like Canada, America, Britain, Australia, Malaysia and India. The liberal communitarians like Michael Sandel, Gutmann Amy, Charles Taylor, Will Kymlicka, Alasdair Macintyre, Appaiah Anthony K, Iris Marion Young, Lord Bhikhu Parekh have been influenced by the philosophical ideologies of Plato, Marx, Hegel and Rousseau. While on the other hand, the liberal individualists like Joseph Raz, John Rawls, John Stuart Mill, Ronald Dworkin, Michael Walzer and Chandran Kukathas have been influenced by thinkers like Hobbes, Locke and Kant. The theory of Multiculturalism has evolved from the communitarianism which takes as its unit of society the idea of class, group or the community that exists as against the liberalism that takes as its unit of society the idea of individual. Such an individual is an insular entity which stands at a distance from all of other identities. Dissociated from all his other identities, he is free and equal to all other individuals. The question of justice does not arise when one is not discriminated on the basis of one’s identities. Such an individual does not exist. Hence, the Rawlsian theory of justice is criticized by the communitarians like Taylor and others. No ‘self’ comes before identity. The idea of personality and individual is a social creation. Persons become persons in a social context and as such not pre-socially individuated. The idea of one’s self is discovered first and then the choice follows. The Rawlsian liberalism has been responded by the communitarians as over-individualistic and justice-blind that regards the individual as the ‘atom’ of the society keeping all his identities outside the public domain. The society is formed after all, for the common interest and hence multiculturalism enters at the second step of communitarianism. Though this is the ‘social-thesis’,
multiculturalism does not deny the individual rights. There is equality among the communities as long as there is freedom within. An individual should be free within the community. The critics of multiculturalism interrogate this internal paradox and raise the query that if a cultural community, intolerant to its own minorities inside, should be tolerated or given the special rights or whether multiculturalism should give rights to the communities which are illiberal. Critics like Brian Barry argue that multiculturalism has a moral paradigm and is an impasse practically. The equal and just redistribution to all cultures and communities is almost impossible. Treating people justly does not mean treating them equally. Treating equally actually means treating unequally as per the requirement. It draws us back to Aristotle who proposed to treat equals equally and unequals unequally. Based on this doctrine, multiculturalism results in conservatism and separatism creating a host of problems and queries.

Parekh, in his admirably wide-ranging and profoundly insightful book *Rethinking Multiculturalism* (2006) argues that for a multicultural society, a monocultural or transcultural political perspective would be ill-suited; it would lead either to alienating peoples or to inflicting of the injustice and violence of cultural assimilation or homogenization on them. He brings out the fact that non-liberal cultural traditions are present not only in the non-western countries but also in the contemporary western societies. He does acknowledge that political thinkers like Raz, Rawls and Kymlicka have, in their different ways, revised liberal political theory to make it accommodative of the cultural and moral pluralism of the contemporary western society. He writes that

> they tend to make ‘liberalism’ their central frame of reference, divide all ways of life into liberal and non-liberal, equate the latter with ill-liberal and to talk of tolerating and rarely of respecting and cherishing them (Parekh, 2006: 110).

The basic moral issues are similar in most of the democracies that face the challenge of multiculturalism and the politics of recognition. It means a lot for the people with different cultural identities; often based on ethnicity, race, gender or religion, to be recognized as equals. What is much more important is the attitude of the centre or the majority or the mass towards them, entailed from whether it is that of just ‘tolerance’ or ‘respect’. The entire issue as problematized by Amy Gutmann is put thus:
We encounter problems, however, once we look into the ‘content’ of the various valued cultures. Should a liberal democratic society respect those cultures whose attitude of ethnic or racial superiority, for example, is antagonistic to other cultures? If so, how can respect for a culture of ethnic or racial superiority be reconciled with the commitment to treating all people as equals? If a liberal democracy need not or should not respect such “supremacist” cultures, even if those cultures are highly valued by many among the disadvantaged, what precisely are the moral limits on the legitimate demand for political recognition of particular cultures? (Gutmann, 1994: 5).

Such idealization or absolutization of the liberal way of life for a multicultural society is, in Parekh’s view, problematic and untenable. Questions concerning whether and how cultural groups should be recognized in politics are among the most salient and vexing ones on the political agenda of many democratic and democratizing societies today.

Charles Taylor, drawing upon the work of Hegel, offers an original, philosophical and historically informed perspective on these problems in his essay called “The Politics of Recognition” (Taylor, 1994: 25-73). He proposes that, human identity is created “dialogically” in response to our relations including our actual dialogue with others. He points out that identity and self-worth are dialogic notions. Rich empirical work in Sociology demonstrated that well-delineated identities as well as well-demarcated communities, to which these identities are linked, are formed through dialogic interaction and struggle. The dichotomy posed by some political theorists between atomistic and socially constructed individuals is therefore a false one. If human identity is dialogically created and constituted, then public recognition of our identity requires a politics that leaves room for us to deliberate publicly about those aspects of our identities that we share with other citizens. A society that recognizes individual identity will be deliberative, democratic society because individual identity is partly constituted by collective dialogues.

Expanding on Taylor’s premise of the dialogically constituted multicultural society Parekh’s analysis throws light on the features of such society and characteristics of the individuals of such society (Parekh, 2006: 340-44). Dialogue is one of the very important three insights of the multicultural perspective by Parekh already stated. A good society, from a multicultural perspective, does not commit itself to a particular
political doctrine or vision of good life because they might not be acceptable to some of its communities. Such a society with singular vision or doctrine might foreclose its future development. Instead, it ought to accept the reality and desirability of cultural diversity and construct its political principles accordingly. Such a society is dialogically constituted and its constant concern should be to create an environment to keep such dialogue going by generating “collectively acceptable principles, institutions and policies” (Parekh, 2006: 340). The dialogue can be nurtured and carried on with certain prime requisites like freedom of expression, public spaces for common participation and certain ethical norms like mutual respect, concern and love for diversity; tolerance, self-respect and willingness to know new ideas and others’ needs open-mindedly. The ability to persuade and resolve the differences with healthy spirit is a vital quality expected in such multicultural society.

The dialogically constituted multicultural society retains both the truth of liberalism and goes beyond it. It is committed to both liberalism and multiculturalism, privileges neither, and moderates the logic of one by that of the other. Apart from its fundamental commitment to the culture and morality of ‘dialogue, the dialogically constituted society sees itself both as a community of citizens and a “community of communities”, Parekh’s own coinage which has generated many responses from the critics (Parekh, 2006: 340). The dialogically constituted multicultural society has a strong notion of common good, maintenance of justice, a vibrant composite culture and an all pervasive sense of community. It cherishes dynamic and interactive, not ghettoized multiculturalism. The development of a common sense of belonging among its citizens is the first requirement for a stable and long-lasting multicultural society. Viewing at the reciprocal nature of commitment/belonging, Parekh states that one gets recognition by recognizing the other. The citizens cannot belong to the political community unless it accepts them as belonging to it; and the same is the case about commitment. Equal citizenship, though essential for status and rights, is not enough as it might fail in fostering the common sense of belonging and generating a feeling of being accepted and welcome. Parekh underlines that this feeling of being full citizens and yet outsiders is difficult to analyze and explain, but it can be deep and real and seriously damage the quality of their citizenship and their commitment to the political community. It is caused by the narrow and exclusive manner in which wider society defines the common good, the demeaning and derogatory ways in which it
talks about some of its members, and the dismissive or obliging ways in which it behaves towards them. Although such individuals are free in principle to participate in its collective life, they often stay away or ghettoize themselves for fear of rejection and ridicule or out of a deep sense of alienation and marginalization.

As Taylor correctly observes, social recognition is central to the individual’s identity and self-worth, and misrecognition or non-recognition can seriously affect both. This raises the question as to how the unrecognized or misrecognized groups can secure recognition. Parekh thinks that here Taylor’s analysis falters. He seems to think that the dominant group can be rationally persuaded to change its views of them by intellectual argument and moral appeal. This is to misunderstand the dynamics of the process of recognition. Parekh believes that the politics of culture is integrally tied up with the politics of power because culture itself is institutionalized power and is also connected with other systems of power. Cultural self-esteem cannot be developed and sustained in a vacuum and requires appropriate changes in all the major areas of life. All countries have their own histories of multiculturalism having the hierarchies of social and political powers in operation. Multiculturalism in the Indian context has not been very successful, though it has a long pre-colonial and colonial history. The conditions of dalits, the people of low castes have been terribly suppressed. Even after the decades of independence, there is hardly any change in the injustice and oppressions faced by them. Despite the implementation of the democratic principles of the Constitution of free India, their situation has not much improved in the postmodern and postcolonial India. Though equal citizenship and also the special rights like Constitutional provision of reserved quota in education and employment have been granted to them to accommodate them to the mainstream of society and economy, they are still excluded socially and systematically from the dominant structures of power. But the recent uprise of the political party called “Bahujan Samaj” has the dalit roots and it is making its mark in Indian politics. The Indian democratic polity looks forward to such representations from the grass root levels to strengthen its egalitarian values. Similarly, the conditions of the indigenous peoples in America, Canada, Australia and many other countries need attention from the point of view of multiculturalism. The issues of the Native Americans and the Blacks, the Aborigines of Australia, the Maories of Newzealand etc. are to be addressed and tackled with respect and justice. The vibrancy and stability of any multicultural
society cannot be sustained unless it ensures that its constituent communities receive both just recognition and a just share of economic and political power. “It requires a robust form of social, economic and political democracy to strengthen its commitment to multiculturalism” (Parekh, 2006: 343). In his theory of recognition Taylor does not dwell upon this requirement much despite being aware of it.

The demand for recognition, enlivened by the ideal of human dignity, points at two directions: (i) one to the protection of the basic rights of individuals as human beings and (ii) to the acknowledgement of the particular needs of individuals as members of specific cultural groups. The liberal democratic defence of diversity draws upon a universalistic rather than a particularistic perspective. Building on Taylor’s analysis and taking up a different vocabulary Michael Walzer states that there may not be one universalistic perspective, but two, which pull liberal democracies in different political directions (Gutmann, 1994: 99-103). In other words, there are two plausible interpretations of this principle – “Treat all people as free and equal beings”. One perspective requires political neutrality among the diverse and often conflicting conceptions of the good life held by citizens of a pluralistic society. The second liberal democratic perspective, also universalistic, does not insist on neutrality for either the consequences or the justifications of public policies, but rather permits to enhance particular cultural values.¹

Walzer sees the two universalistic perspectives as defining two different conceptions of liberalism called ‘Liberalism 1’ and ‘Liberalism 2’, the second more democratic than the first. ‘Liberalism 2’ authorizes democratic communities to determine public policy within the broad limits of respect for the individual rights and authorizes them to choose policies that are more or less, neutral among the particular cultural identities of groups. Because ‘Liberalism 2’ is democratic, it can choose ‘Liberalism 1’, state neutrality, through a democratic consensus. And ‘Liberalism 1’ chosen within ‘Liberalism 2’ is what Walzer and Parekh would choose taking after the premise of Taylor. Here is the point where the liberals and the communitarians reach at a consensus. It is in keeping with the dominant social understanding of the U.S.A. as a society of immigrants and the same can be the case with any other country treating the immigrants. Perhaps the two universalisms are better interpreted not as two distant and politically comprehensive conceptions of liberalism but as two strands of a single
conception of liberal democracy that recommends, and even sometimes requires state neutrality in certain realms such as religion, but not in others, such as education, where democratically accountable institutions are free to reflect the values of one or more cultural communities as long as they also respect the basic rights of all citizens. The dignity of free and equal beings requires liberal democratic institutions to be non-repressive, non-discriminatory, and deliberative. Hence, the recognition of the particular cultural identities of those they represent. This conclusion identifies liberal democracy at its best with ‘both’ the protection of universal rights and public recognition of particular cultures.

As stated earlier, there is a parallel problem of disrespect and lack of constructive communication among the spokespersons of ethnic, religious and racial groups in the socio-political life, a problem that too often leads to violence. Without mutual respect among various cultures the valued goals of multiculturalism cannot be pursued. At the same time, it has to be clear that every aspect of cultural diversity is not worthy of respect. Some differences like Racism and anti-Semitism ought not to be ‘respected’ even if the expressions of Racist and anti-Semitic views are ‘tolerated’. There is a difference between tolerating and respecting differences. Tolerance extends to the widest range of views, so long as they stop short of threats and other direct and discernible harms to individuals. Respect is far more discriminating from a moral point of view. A multicultural society is bound to include a wide range of such respectable moral disagreements. Respectable moral disagreements, on the other hand, call for deliberation, not denunciation within the moral premise of multiculturalism. The multicultural societies and communities that stand for the freedom and equality of all people rest upon mutual respect for reasonable intellectual, political and cultural differences. Mutual respect requires a widespread willingness and ability to articulate our disagreements, to discern the difference between respectable and disrespectsable disagreements, and to be open to changing our own minds when faced with well-reasoned criticism. The moral promise of multiculturalism depends on the exercise of these deliberative virtues and the dialogical aspect.

The multicultural societies experience the problems never raised before. They find it hard to reconcile the just demands of unity and diversity. They struggle to achieve
political unity without cultural uniformity, and to be inclusive without being assimilationist. They seek to maintain a balance between the cultivation of a common sense of belonging through precious identity of shared citizenship and cherishing/respecting their legitimate cultural differences and plural identities. The minority rights are difficult to manage anywhere in the world. No multicultural society so far, with its politics of multiculturalism, has succeeded in tackling this knotty political issue. As Parekh mentions, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia met their violent doom; Canada lives in the shadow of Quebec’s secession; India narrowly missed a second Partition of the country; Indonesia shows signs of disintegration; Sudan, Nigeria and others are torn by violent conflicts; and the sad story is endlessly repeated in many other parts of the world. Even the advanced, stable and politically mature democracies like United States, Great Britain, France and Australia have so far had only limited success, and show signs of moral and emotional disorientation in the face of increasing demands for recognition and equality. Rajeev Bhargava also discusses some of the problems arising out of the politics of multiculturalism (Bhargava, 2002: 94-97). First, it has been facing the formidable task of not to essentialise and harden identities resulting in the radical exclusion of people. Second, by its encouragement of cultural particularity, it appears to deepen divisions and undermine the common foundations of society. Third, it supports total community power over individual freedom and by lending equal rights to oppressive cultures; it endangers values of liberal democracy. The policy which has been formed on the egalitarian principles, itself turns out to be the cause of erasing those values. But still, it is imperative to design and nurture multicultural polities. If cultural particularity is pervasive and valuable and the number of political communities can never be the same as the number of cultural communities, it is neither feasible nor desirable to have unicultural polities.

**Democratic Multiculturalism and the Indian Case:**

Recent demands for a multicultural society constitute a plea for ‘Egalitarian Multiculturalism’. The demands for political recognition would be made available to every individual within the society, based on neither class nor level of achievement but rather one’s overall way of life – culture. Any politics that requires the exclusion
of cultural identity as a condition for membership or recognition is no longer viable. Within egalitarian multiculturalism, Bhargava distinguishes between liberal and authoritarian forms of it (Bhargava, 2002: 86). “Liberal Multiculturalism” is liberal because equal recognition of cultural groups must be in accordance with requirements of basic individual liberties and perhaps with even individual autonomy. “Authoritarian Multiculturalism” affirms equal recognition of all cultural groups including the ones that violate the freedom of individuals. The Imperial Rule is a good example of this. Each group was granted considerable autonomy in exchange for their acceptance of Imperial hegemony. The same is true of the British Empire in India where Hindus, Muslims, Parsees and Christians were given equal legal status and every individual gradually felt compelled to identify with one of these communities and to comply with their separate laws. These were brought together and then divided for more effective political domination by the British (Walzer, 1995: 23-31). India has a long history of the multicultural socio-political situation but it was quite different from the one that has taken shape in the post-independent and post-modern India through its very constitution since the 50s.

Enunciating the concept of “Democratic Multiculturalism” Bhargava very systematically goes on to explain first about the political and cultural communitarians (Bhargava, 2002: 97-100). For democratic-minded political communitarians the central issue is the need to shed the general liberal fear of the political domain and to bring into it everything -- the most personal, even the most contentious. For cultural communitarians, the crucial issue hinges on the constitutive link between identity and particular cultural communities. A cultural communitarian is not necessarily a political communitarian. Likewise, political communitarianism can exist without a commitment to cultural communitarianism, as in the republican state. By itself, multiculturalism has close affinities with cultural communitarians. This is why it may leave behind authoritarian, anti-democratic political structures. The distinctiveness of democratic multiculturalism is that it combines cultural and political communitarianism. Democratic multiculturalism recognizes the importance of cultural identity, the need to maintain cultural difference and is committed to bring these differences into the political domain since these differences frequently turn into conflicts and clashes; it is also committed to their resolution through dialogue,
discussion and negotiation. Drawing on Taylor’s argument, Bhargava is here being more precise and specific.

Multiculturalism emphasizes the importance of particular cultural communities and by implication the need for cultural difference. While both republicanism and liberal individualism are equally blind to the importance of multiculturalism and altogether evade multicultural issues, the authoritarian multiculturalism negates individual liberty and autonomy, and is obsessed solely with identity and belonging. Liberal multiculturalism, on the other hand, recognizes the value of both but denies the entry of issues of identity or belonging into the political domain and therefore, ultimately tilts in favour of individual autonomy. Democratic multiculturalism is fully prepared to tackle the tensions between identity and belonging on the one hand and requirements of individual autonomy on the other; and to bring both sets of issues into the political domain.

Democratic multiculturalism is better than the liberal one because in the liberal multiculturalism the oppressive cultural practices flourish due to the indifference of the State. The subordination and domination are likely to continue unless the State intervenes. The success and failure of Indian secularism provide ample evidence in favour of the need for democratic multiculturalism. The State has had to democratically intervene in religious and cultural practices to get rid of oppressive practices. Such practices have continued, hardened and become worse whenever the State has refrained from intervention or acted without democratic legitimacy. A number of questions have been raised against democratic multiculturalism. Bhargava rightfully asks if it would work in all contexts or if the conflicts can always be resolved through discussion and dialogue. Another important query is whether democratic multiculturalism is insufficiently attentive to the depth and extent of conflicts. It should be wary of such aggravated conflicts. Bhargava states that there is danger of over-politicization of such conflicting issues if the State gets itself involved in them. The political strategies can be divided into two categories, the politics of involvement and the politics of detachment. Bhargava asks if it is wise to implement a politics of involvement in the democratic multiculturalism whatever the context may be. Maybe the politicization of culture and collective identity are justified but the extent of its limits is to be fixed up. Drawing towards a solution and suggesting an in-
between situation, Bhargava explains that those excluded from participation and those who lose persistently tend to detach themselves from politics. In this context, an assertive politics of involvement cuts both ways. It brings hitherto marginalized groups within the domain of politics. Conversely, it may help those already in politics to take complete control and exclude some groups altogether. To prevent such domination, a better strategy may well be to support mutual detachment. Occasionally, the best available strategy to contain hegemonising forces is to get everybody to support a “politics of reciprocal detachment” (Bhargava, 2002: 99). In the ideological line of Taylor, Parekh and Walzer, Bhargava suggests that liberal values should be incorporated within the purview of the democratic multiculturalism to make it more pragmatic and overcome its limits. In short, a space must be imparted within the egalitarian multiculturalism for liberal politics because it at least ensures that none loses out completely, a wise choice in certain contexts - and, therefore, it remains a reliable strategic mode for formulating the political policies.

The same point can be reformulated by deploying some terms introduced by Bhargava himself pertaining to forms of multiculturalism (Bhargava, 2002: 85-86). To emphasize the current context within which the demands of recognition are made, it helps to situate this issue in what Bhargava calls the “broader dialectic of multiculturalism”. The three forms he describes are namely, particularized hierarchy, universalist equality and particularized equality.²

When the first moment of particularized hierarchy is safely buried in the past, there can be a confident move from the second moment in the dialectic to the third and final moment of particularized equality, i.e. to the democratic multiculturalism. If, on the other hand, one step in the direction of the third really takes two steps back to the first moment, then simply there should be a hold-on to the moment of universalistic equality that constitutes liberal multiculturalism under certain conditions, the eminently liberal fear of over-politicization is justified. Since subordination has never been a thing of the past but always an ever-present danger in societies everywhere, even within the egalitarian social structure, it can be concluded, according to Bhargava, that a version of liberal multiculturalism must have a permanent place in larger democratic politics.
The multicultural framework is often seen as opposed or neglecting the other framework which stresses on the equitable distribution of material resources and abstract universalistic individual rights. Bhargava calls it the abstract universalistic, i.e. AU framework as against the Multiculturalist, i.e. M-framework (Bhargava, 2002: 87). Proponents of these broad frameworks are suspicious of one another and vie for the same space. Bhargava is of the view that the two frameworks are not irretrievably opposed. Both are concerned with questions of power and hegemony as well as with questions of dignity. Whereas one concentrates on direct political domination and economic exploitation, the other focuses on the more subtle ways in which disabilities and inadequacies, loss of self-esteem and self-confidence develop within individuals and groups. In real-life situations both are frequently intertwined. It remains true however that the two frameworks cannot easily be reconciled by the inclusion of one by the other. Issues grouped under multiculturalism cannot be incorporated and resolved fully into the domain of social justice as conceived by the first framework. The two can be reconciled but only after they have evolved in a direction away from how they are currently conceived and formulated.

In India, however, multiculturalism as a theory of democracy and citizens has received little attention. It appears quite paradoxical that in a country, which had been among the first few democracies to endorse the principle of equality between groups, there has been no serious attempt to theorize the idea of a multicultural democracy. It has been said that multiculturalism does not fit well with the much complicated and deep seated pluralism of traditional India. The complex and oppressing caste-system and the issue of the dalits arising out of it, the differences among the tribal, rural, semi-urban, urban and metro-urban populations and also the cultural differences resulting from various regions and religions – all constitute the composite plurality of India. Bhargava’s counter-argument has two versions. What makes them versions of the same objection is that for both, multiculturalism carries a heavy ideological baggage derived from its links with the context of its origin. The first links it to a new phase of global capitalism, and the other relates to the specific experience of Canada and United States. It is alleged that such a framework with its strong ties with the experience of highly ‘developed’ nations or with international capitalism could or should not have much value or relevance in the Indian context. Bhargava views it more as a framework that brings together a number of distinct themes such as identity,
recognition, cultural belonging etc. which all respond to common human needs but are understood and dealt with variously in different societies. These issues, according to Bhargava, emerge at three levels – first, across the nations at international level; second, at the sites where the nation-states are formed and third, within the nation-state -- in the wider social and narrower political domains. Its abstract, indefinite decontextualised character enables it to have several ideological incarnations as well as applicability across time and space. Unlike the critics of multiculturalism believing in its inapplicability in the Indian context, Bhargava believes that the concepts and theories, at least some of them if not all, possess a degree of flexibility and mobility that makes it possible for them to have multiple applications in contexts different from where they first emerged. This is why there can be a legitimate talk on an Indian multiculturalism though its theories are imports from Canada and the US. So, the critics of Indian multiculturalism who allege it to be an alien framework highly over-contextualize it.

Gurpreet Mahajan is also of the same opinion as of Bhargava (Mahajan, 2002: 16-17). She states that the multicultural design of the Indian polity emerged as a consequence of the political negotiations between assertive and highly mobilised communities. The constitutional schema was informed by a deep understanding of the different sites of group inequality within the Indian polity. The Constituent Assembly debated at length the issue of cultural majoritarianism and it also incorporated a framework of minority rights to safeguard religious and cultural minorities. The rights given at that time were essentially an outcome of the political consensus that emerged in that historical context. This was not backed by a theoretical defence, either of the idea of special rights for minorities or of the rights that were actually given to specific kinds of minorities in the Constitution of India. Hence, considerations of group equality received quite a lot of attention but remained more or less untheorised. Thus, while a multicultural polity was designed in India, the principles of multiculturalism were not systematically enunciated. Based on the same argument, Bhargava too asserts that some issues and themes of multiculturalism originate in the practices of modern India with greater salience, depth and togetherness than anywhere else in the world. If so, then multiculturalism is not of an American or Canadian but of an Indian origin (Bhargava, 2002: 101).
Explaining the three levels at which multiculturalism emerges Bhargava makes a strong case for Indian multiculturalism. First, it is at international level that multiculturalism connotes a struggle against western hegemony. Second, it is the site where nations are formed, where it fights ethno-nationalism. Third, it is within the nation-state where it acknowledges group rights. Whereas the Canadian and American multiculturalisms are situated only at the third level and have been recognized to be so situated only in the last two decades, Indian multiculturalism exists at all three levels and has originated even earlier.

At the international level, where multiculturalism signals a demand for authenticity, a way of being that is uniquely one’s own; there exists a long Indian tradition of cultural nationalism. At the second level, despite all its internal problems, Indian nationalism has fought narrowly-conceived Hindu and Muslim nationalism. Finally, at the third level, i.e., within the nation-state, group specific rights were recognized in India explicitly in the constitution (Bhargava, 2002: 101).

Such rights include the right to cultural particularity as well as self-government rights enshrined in the articles of the Constitution. So, India has been multicultural at each of these three levels and the move to become multicultural began over a century ago. Many issues currently under discussion elsewhere in the world had already engaged the Consistent Assembly and were resolved with the framing of the Indian Constitution adopted in 1950.

Mahajan also explores the principle of multiculturalism in the Indian context (Mahajan, 2002: 17). It is not surprising that the task has already been undertaken in western democracies which are marked by a high degree of individualism. Here, arguing against the tide of liberal ethos, political theorists had to offer a systematic defence of the ideals of multiculturalism. In an environment where the autonomy of the self was greatly valued, they had the onerous task of convincing others that cultural community identities are constitutive of the self, and hence, need to be recognized and respected within a democratic policy. But in India, since long, the unit of society or decision-making has been the community and not the individual. Hence, the significance of the community and its identity for the individual identity has been acknowledged without much persuasion from the liberal front. Despite its long practice in India, multiculturalism as a coherent political theory, with its distinct
conception of democracy and citizenship, has emerged only in the recent past and the issues have been debated more politically than analytically and academically. Though the theory tilts towards the western scholarship, its appreciation is mediated by the richness of the Indian experience.

The Critique of Multiculturalism:

Perhaps the most distinguishing mark of these recent enunciations is that the idea of universal citizenship is questioned and instead the idea of “differentiated citizenship” with “group differentiated rights” is explored. The view that people must be incorporated not merely as citizens but also as members of discrete communities possessing multiple loyalties, has challenged the most cherished norms of liberal democracy. It has, at the same time, provided a framework within which special rights for minorities may be discussed and debated. It has outlined a new vision of democracy, one in which cultural community identities are not only treasured but also sought to be protected and made secure. Contemporary multiculturalism is, therefore, more than a theory of minority rights. It is a conception of democracy in which diverse cultures are represented as equals in the public domain. The idea that different individuals and communities should be treated as ‘equals’ within the nation-state and ‘equal distribution’ as having a relative connotation, have been steadily gaining wider acceptance. Its concern for equality and equal respect between groups distinguishes multiculturalism from previous theories of tolerance and composite culture. Multiculturalism has raised the issues of cultural discrimination that the liberal democracies everywhere needs to address. The contemporary theories of multiculturalism counter-relate discrimination by protecting and preserving and acknowledging minority cultures. In the pursuit of equal treatment, the ideal of diversity is promoted, while some votaries value diversity of cultures in itself, others claim that survival of marginalized minority cultures is a prerequisite for their being treated as equal. In either case, multiculturalism pleads for policies that promote diversity of cultures by enabling minority cultures protect themselves. This response to the issue of cultural discrimination is quite problematic. The commitment to preserve and promote cultural diversity, heterogeneous and incommensurable but distinct from plurality, further reinforces the need to make minority cultures
politically and socially secure so that they survive and flourish. It is this attempt to protect the marginalized cultures that differentiate multiculturalism from hermeneutic and anthropological studies of other cultures. Multiculturalism challenges the notion of universal rights of citizenship and claims for the special rights for the marginalized minority cultures. Mahajan explores the idea of ‘differentiated citizenship’ and examines such special rights meant separately for the individuals and communities. They enhance the options for individuals located within the communities and they can choose to exit or conform. Thus, the individual freedom and rights are protected and hence the liberal ethos within the framework of multiculturalism imparting special rights to communities too and thereby enabling them to preserve their distinct way of life.

Mahajan emphasizes the need to replace the multicultural reading of community identity and membership with the idea of “non-conformist membership” (Mahajan, 2002: 198-218). She argues that this kind of membership, of individuals’ or community’s, is sensitive, both to the contextual dimension of identities as well as to the role that they play in the construction of the self. It also enables to make a distinction between having an identity, asserting it against the homogenizing policies of the nation-state, and preserving that identity. The concept of non-conformist membership allows separating policies that challenge the homogenizing agenda of the nation-state from those that value diversity in itself. The prevalent enunciations of multiculturalism advocating the special rights that give priority to the community over the state are deeply shaped by the histories of Europe and America. Drawing upon the experiences of India, the ideology of multiculturalism has to be re-conceptualized to argue that the State is only one of the many sources of minority marginalization. Quite often, it is the action of other groups in society rather than the cultural orientation of the State that are the major sources of discrimination in a polity. Multiculturalism needs to be cognizant of these diverse sites of culture-related discrimination for they call for different strategies. Policies that are required for curbing cultural majoritarianism or assimilation are different from those that are needed for battling discrimination that stems from the actions of other groups in society. It has been recommended that instead of differentiating rights on the basis of different categories of claimants, it is preferable to think of rights that are necessary for minimizing discrimination against rights that are essential for promoting other
collective goals, such as promoting cultural diversity. If multiculturalism is to challenge minority discrimination, it must therefore reinvent itself. In particular, it must rethink both the ideas of community membership as well as special rights and policies necessary for dismantling structures of cultural discrimination. However, this may not be possible in a framework that privileges and values cultural diversity by itself. So, the core agenda of multiculturalism requires close and critical analysis. There is a need to rethink on multiculturalism in a way that it acknowledges the presence of cultural context of experience without attempting to protect it.

The need to reconsider the theory of multiculturalism has arisen due to the wide critical response it has received. The proponents of multiculturalism have tried to respond to the concerns of the critics. In particular, they have tried to assure the sceptics that the group differentiated rights will not empower communities to legitimize practices that sanction discrimination of vulnerable sections of the population. The formulations of multiculturalism have to still prove themselves and adequately address the difficulties and complexities of the problems already noted in the multicultural notion of culture and equality; community and identity; minority discrimination; and diversity and difference.

There are mainly, four reasonably fair rebuttals offered in defence of the agenda for preserving cultures, protecting diversity and sanctioning special rights for minorities (Mahajan, 2002: 166). The first involves the principle of difference. By privileging differences completely, it argues that respect for difference calls for unconditional protection of diverse cultures and practices. The second argument addresses liberal apprehensions by limiting special rights to only a few minorities and restricting that these rights are not intended for use against internal dissent or differences. These rights are to be imparted only to protect and empower communities against pressures of assimilation from the outside. The third asserts that protecting minority cultures does not entail preserving all types of minority practices. The limits of ‘permissible’ diversity in society need to be determined. It further suggests that the parameters of permissible diversity may be defined with reference to the values enshrined in the constitution of the land. The fourth response introduces two cautions. It states that special group rights are to be granted only if they enhance genuine inclusion of the minority communities within the polity; and when minorities exercise these rights in a
way that is agreeable with the principle of fair treatment to all members. Here, special rights of minorities are meant only for conserving collectively valued conceptions of good life. The aim of these rights is to ascertain treatment to minorities in ways that do not place additional pressures on other groups, including the majority. These four arguments represent four absolutely different situations on multiculturalism. What merits serious consideration is that all of them endorse the agenda of protecting minority cultures and promoting communitarian values.

The problem with much of the contemporary multicultural theory is that it often blends membership with the demand for protecting and preserving a community culture. According to Mahajan, multiculturalism needs to acknowledge the dimension of community membership and abandon the priority it accords to protecting and preserving a collective community identity and culture. The idea that cultural differences are also a source of disadvantage and discrimination in society is the unique contribution of multiculturalism to democratic theory. In a democracy, the principle of non-discrimination is the central, if not the defining value. Commitment to the notion of non-discrimination, in the dual senses of identity and culture, is an essential and irrevocable norm of democracy. Approving the principle of non-discrimination, however, requires constant vigilance. Democracies have to be constantly vigilant about the possibility that either kind of discrimination can be the source of injustice, disadvantage or unfair treatment. The identification of cultural identity as a possible ground for discrimination has set a new agenda for liberal democracies everywhere. The awareness that compulsive assimilation or coercive inclusion, like forced exclusion, is a mode of discrimination, has added a new facet to the idea of identity-based discrimination. It has, indeed, problematised the discourse of democracy. The issue of culture-based discrimination has received specific articulation within the contemporary theories of multiculturalism. Since most of the theorization on the subject has come from liberal democracies of the West; the notion of culture-based discrimination, its precise nature and form, the language of multicultural discourse, the goal of cultural preservation, have all been shaped by particularly the western context. The discourse has, as a result, taken a distinct course, one where a nation-state is the main site of cultural discrimination, special community rights are the most appropriate form of countering that discrimination, and preserving minority cultures a mode of minimizing discrimination and enhancing diversity. Each
of these dimensions of multicultural political theory needs to be reconsidered carefully because they conceptualize the issue of minority discrimination rather narrowly, and sanction rights for the sake of promoting cultural diversity rather than minimizing discrimination. As put forth by Mahajan, the following areas of the discourse on multiculturalism can be reoriented --

(i) **Reconceptualizing the Issue of Special Rights in the Matter of Cultural Discrimination by the Nation-State and Other Cultures:**

The most distinctive feature of contemporary multiculturalism, as it has been theorized in the West, is that it locates the issue of cultural discrimination in the context of the nation-state, the primary source of minority discrimination in society. Endorsement by the nation-state of the culture of the majority and the accompanying policies of assimilation are almost always the sources of minority discrimination. However, the singular emphasis on the nation-state as the site of discrimination is quite limiting. There are often other equally important sites of cultural discrimination and these too need to be considered within the framework of multiculturalism. In India, special rights have been granted to the minorities by the Constitution itself. At the time of framing the Constitution, the minorities were anxious that the independent State might take on the identity of the religious majority and impose an agenda of cultural homogenization. This fear has got the expression in the fiction under study as the Parsees had been very apprehensive about their position in the independent India. Consequently, to allay these fears, the Constitution provided special rights for minorities to protect their distinctive cultural and linguistic identity. Apart from the entitlement to establish their own educational institutions, eligible for funding by the State, the recognition to community Personal Codes, for governing the family matters were also imparted by the State. It also accorded communities the right to continue with their religious practices. Although the State in independent India has not been completely neutral or equidistant from all communities, minority cultures and practices have received some public recognition. Public holidays on religious and cultural festivals of the minorities, participation of state officials on these occasions, acceptance of multiple codes of dress and official recognition to several minority languages, are some of the ways in which public space has been created for minority communities. Although specific linguistic identities received recognition after
considerable struggle by each group, and even today rights granted to cultural minorities are not always adequately protected; yet, in principle at least, cultural minorities are acknowledged and accommodated in the public domain.

In India, the cultural rights of religious and other minorities have been recognized by the Constitution. At least non-recognition of cultural minorities and their practices is not the primary source of disadvantage and discrimination. Instead, it is the actions of the other groups in society and the complicity of the government officials that is a major source of minority discrimination. Time and again, communities have suffered on account of the actions of other communities and political groups in society. As collective identities are constructed in relation to the ‘other’, the way they are perceived and represented by others is crucial to their self-identification. Just as denying public recognition harms the other, similarly the representation of a community as an ‘outsider’ or ‘anti-national’ serves to exclude and discriminate it in the public arena. In India, the construction of specific groups as hostile ‘others’ has been a common form of discrimination of minorities, and it is not just the officially recognized minorities that have been victimized in this process.

In the 1960s, the Shiv Sena targeted the South Indian community living in Mumbai and launched a virulent attack on them. Labelling this community as ‘outsiders’ who had ‘usurped’ the rightful place of the ‘native’ ‘Maharashtrians’, the Shiv Sena accused the South Indians of taking away jobs and positions from the ‘natives’. To ensure that the jobs in the city go to the Marathi speakers, the Shiv Sena singled out and pressured individuals and groups into hiring Maharashtrians. The Shiv Sena subsequently targeted the Communists, and later, the Muslims, with a similar strategy in the 80s. In both cases, they dubbed these groups as anti-national elements whose loyalty lay outside the territory of the nation-state. Even in the first decade of the twenty-first century such attacks by the Shiv Sena take place. Recently its neo-leader Raj Thakrey of newly formed branch MNS had been arrested for instigating an attack on the North-Indians and driving them out from the public exam hall. The motive was the same as to label them as ‘outsiders’ usurping the job opportunities from the local people. This gave them enough reason to castigate individual members of the group and demand proof of their loyalty to the nation-state. Time and again, Shiv Sena has been over-sensitive to the public statements made by the Muslim and the North-Indian
film stars who had been targeted and harangued individually. Venom has very often been spat against them for their being from ‘other’ states and regions and thriving in Mumbai. In all these instances, the representation of specific communities as ‘outsiders’ is a mode of discriminating against them and hence disadvantaging them in the public arena. Discrimination that occurs through the representation of communities as hostile others is reinforced more stridently by acts of communal violence. In India, violence directed at members of a specific community is perhaps the severest but most frequent expression of minority discrimination. The anti-Sikh riots in 1984, the Babri Masjid riots in 1992 and the Godhra riots in 2002 are the proofs that discrimination occurs by other cultures and religions despite the secular Constitution of the post-independent India. The trauma of sudden and sporadic violence that results in the death and destruction of innumerable community members brings home the reality of being an alien and unaccepted minority. The irrationality of the act, and frequently, the complicity of state authorities, is a continuous reminder to the victims of their marginalized minority status. In a way, the perpetrators of communal violence seek to give this message repeatedly to the minorities. Just coping with this continuous reality of insecurity and fear reinforces minority consciousness among the victims. It makes them vulnerable and disadvantaged minorities, whose very existence and right to life is under threat. Rohinton Mistry has very well brought out the fear, anxiety and insecurity of his tiny community settled mostly in Bombay. In his fiction, under study here, he has rendered a very bold comment on the agencies like Shiv Sena that appears almost as an antagonist in his novels.

The above stated two distinct sources of minority discrimination require different strategies, though the latter form of discrimination has received little attention so far within the multicultural frame. However, the neglect of the other sites of cultural discrimination and the exclusive focus on the cultural identity of the nation-state are relevant because they have shaped the multicultural response to the issue of minority discrimination. Most theories of multiculturalism advocate group-differentiated rights for identified minority communities in order to correct the majoritarian cultural biases of the nation-state and create space for minority cultures in the public domain. Rights claiming exemption, assistance, recognition, or even separate representation, are defended for the sake of minimizing discrimination that arises from the cultural character of the nation-state. At times, they enable marginalized minorities to carry
their culture into the public domain, but they are, nevertheless, ineffective in checking the discrimination that these communities suffer due to the actions of the other groups in society. Indeed, they are not intended for that purpose and cannot provide any safeguard against the latter.

When cultural identities are the basis on which majority groups target specific minorities, what is often required, as a minimum condition for fairness, is an unequivocal defence of the rights of individuals as citizens. Unless the state takes the responsibility of protecting the basic rights of all its citizens and punishing those who violate them, discrimination of this kind is bound to persist. Consequently, the State has to be pressured to uphold the universal rights of citizenship as a condition for equal treatment of all cultures and communities. This needs to be asserted forcefully because in the debates around multiculturalism, community rights have been pitted against individual rights. Against the backdrop of a homogenizing nation-state that almost always embodies the culture of the majority, cultural community rights and individual rights have been transformed into binary opposites. It is assumed that discrimination of minorities can only be overcome by granting special community rights. It appears that individual rights have little or no role to play in this. What is being argued here, particularly with reference to Indian experiences, is that discrimination faced by minorities requires that one need not think in terms of either cultural community rights or individual rights of citizenship. The two are mutually exclusive. While special rights given to cultural communities can help correct the majoritarian biases of the nation-state and enable minorities to retain their identity; individual rights are essential and indispensable for protecting minorities from discrimination by the actions of other groups in society. Oppression that emerges from the hostility and violence of the dominant community and other groups in society require unambiguous defence of individual rights of citizenship without which the discrimination of marginalized and vulnerable communities cannot be minimized or eliminated.
(ii) **Eliminating Cultural Discrimination by Granting Special Rights for Promoting Non-Conformist Membership:**

Another particularity of the western discourses on multiculturalism, and one that needs to be examined critically, is that it privileges, conditionally or otherwise, the task of promoting cultural diversity. On most occasions this goal is prioritized because it is regarded to be the most appropriate way of challenging policies of homogenization and minority discrimination. Since multiculturalism sees the suppression or exclusion of minority cultural practices as signs of their discrimination, it maintains that by incorporating diversity in the public arena, minority communities would be able to protect their identities, make their cultures secure and be included as equals in the polity. This belief that safeguarding a culturally distinct way of life is necessary for promoting fairness and minimizing minority discrimination is however quite problematic. As the measures aimed at enhancing diversity and protecting minority cultures challenge the interventions of the State, they privilege the voice of the community but remain largely inattentive to the inequalities of power within the community. Since policies framed with a view to promoting cultural diversity almost always empower and strengthen communities, it is necessary to rethink on this agenda.

There is a much deeper problem presented by the agenda of preserving cultures. The policy of protecting and preserving minority cultures ‘assumes’ that the assertion of one’s cultural identity manifests the desire to protect that culture. Since belonging to a community and valuing its membership is associated with collective commitment to a set of shared goods, affirming one’s cultural identity is ‘interpreted’ as a demand for protecting those shared goods and goals. It is this ‘purported link’ between having/asserting an identity and seeking to protect and even preserve that culture that is deeply problematic. This understanding of cultural identity needs to be interrogated for it transforms the assertion of difference and distinctiveness into a policy of preserving a culture and its defining practices. The theories of multiculturalism need to make a distinction between having an identity and protecting it. No doubt individuals belong to specific communities and, to certain extent; their actions derive their meaning from these memberships. However, this does not mean that they affirm or seek to protect the different practices and symbols associated with that cultural
identity. The expression and construction of an identity is context-specific. At times, people assert their distinctiveness to protest against assimilation, and at other times, they may express it to have the option of continuing with a particular practice. To take an example, when Sikhs protect against the law that requires all two-wheeler riders to wear a helmet, they assert collectively that the turban is the prescribed headdress for members of their community. To challenge the action of the state and to assert their distinct identity, they rally together and underline the importance of the turban as a sign of their separate religious and cultural identity. However, wearing of the turban on this occasion and the collective assertion of the value of this symbol does not imply that all the members of the community seek to protect and preserve that practice. In fact, many of the protesters may themselves not be observing this practice in everyday life. They may simply put on the turban to oppose the actions of the state and support those who wish to continue with wearing the turban. The chosen expression of their identity here aims to secure for members of the community the ‘option’ of wearing the turban. Even as the community members affirm the importance of this symbol, it does not imply that all members actually observe this practice and wear the turban, or that measures be taken to ensure that this practice survives. One needs to make this distinction between valuing an identity, or the practices and symbols associated with it, and seeking to preserve it.

Community practices, like the chosen symbols of identity, are thus subject to continuous redefinition and negotiation. The language of protection and preservation is for this reason quite inappropriate for discussing community membership. It does restrict options for internal members. To say that community cultures be protected only against external pressures does not also solve the problem. It too restricts choices for internal members and promotes conformity with existing practices. Consequently, it is necessary to abandon the agendum of preserving cultures by making a distinction between accommodations made with a view to giving internal members the choice of continuing with a way of life, if they so choose, from rights granted to protect a culture. Within a community, almost all practices, no matter how deeply valued they may be, are subject to multiple readings and assessments. Religious communities and sects do not always allow space for the expression of these differences. The point is that religious and cultural communities, at times, inculcate discipline by stressing conformity with a set of core practices, and the multicultural agenda of protecting and
preserving minority cultures tends to legitimize such actions. Then a culture may survive, but only by compelling conformity. If multiculturalism is to be rescued from communitarian appropriations, then this notion of community membership needs to be abandoned. Protecting minority cultures and enabling them to preserve their identity does not redress the imbalance. In fact, it creates new forms of inequity and discrimination and it is this that multiculturalism must also guard against.

The pursuit and enhancement of cultural diversity reinforces the problems put up by the agendum of preserving the cultures because it is always accompanied by the belief that people sharing the same identity cherish and protect the same values. It, therefore, constructs the community as a homogeneous entity that is shaped by myths of common origin, a shared faith and past experiences – an image that bears close resemblance to the communitarian representation of community. One needs, therefore, to be extremely cautious about affirming the goal of preserving and protecting cultural diversity. The achievement of the primary objective of multiculturalism encourages the internal homogenization of the community. Hence, the policies become self-paradoxical, a major problem in itself. Theories of multiculturalism must, therefore, aim to minimize cultural discrimination, internal as well as external, rather than enhancing diversity of cultures. This goal of eliminating discrimination can be sought to realize by creating ‘options’ that may be explored by internal members.

The difficulties that arise from this perspective of enhancing diversity cannot be simply redressed by making minor changes, such as including women and other marginal voices in the institutions of the community or by attending to other procedural dimension of the community’s functioning. The rights that are sanctioned from the perspective of promoting cultural diversity are significantly different from those that are justified to check the policies of cultural homogenization. They require a paradigmatic shift in focus; a move whereby special rights for minorities are not granted for protecting minority cultures or enhancing diversity. Rather, they are sorted with a view to sustaining options for internal members, including the option of continuing with their cultural way of life. In other words, the guiding norm must be the principle of non-discrimination rather than that of cultural diversity. Democracy requires commitment to the ideal of non-discrimination. Consequently, in a
multicultural democratic/egalitarian polity, the pursuit of cultural diversity needs to be mediated through the concern for non-discrimination. The centrality currently accorded by multiculturalism to the ideal of cultural diversity can, however, be displaced only if the multicultural conception of community life and minority discrimination is revised and replaces the central agendum. It is necessary to begin by recognizing that valuing a cultural community identity is not a claim for protecting that culture, let alone the practices by which it is defined. All identities are subject to re-construction and re-configuration. This means that cultures and communities are, in a manner of speaking, underdetermined, for the practices and institutions that constitute them are themselves changing. Consequently, special rights have to be structured in a way that takes cognizance of this fluid nature of cultures and their identities. Instead of conceiving them as measures enabling communities to protect and conserve their culture, they must, instead, be designed to give individuals the choice of carrying on with a given way of life, if they so desire. What needs to be promoted and valued through them is ‘a non-conformist membership’.

Once it is accepted that belonging to a community involves valuing non-conformist membership, then the goal of protecting and preserving a culture will not follow from the premise that cultural community identity is deeply prized by individuals. This does not mean that cultural diversity has no relevance. On the contrary, the presence of cultural diversity is a prime condition for recognizing the oppression of the majority as well as for challenging its hegemony. Since the majority asserts its hegemony by negating and suppressing difference, it is necessary to render space for the expression of cultural diversity in the public domain. However, ‘creating space’ for the expression of differences is significantly different from pursuing the goal of enhancing and preserving the cultural diversity and devising policies that promote this end. Multiculturalism has to be attentive to this distinction, particularly while sorting claims for cultural rights of the communities.

Contemporary multiculturalism shows that the nation comprises diverse communities but it does not subject the cultural community to the same scrutiny. As a result, the community remains a homogeneous entity. In fact, it is included in the public domain and represented in the deliberative process as a unified collectivity with a single voice. To promote the ideal of non-discrimination, multiculturalism has also to
explore the differences, heterogeneity and multivocality that exist within a community, both at the level of practices as well as substantive conceptions of good life. If multiculturalism is to challenge the culture-based discrimination, then it is an absolute necessity to question this assumption about the homogeneity of the community. Minority discrimination cannot simply be addressed by accommodating marginalized communities in the public domain; space also has to be made for accommodating marginalized groups within the community in the same way. Accommodation of both kinds, intercommunitarian as well as intracommunitarian, external as well as internal, is necessary to ensure that some communities are not excluded from the public arena on account of their differences and that the differences that they themselves incorporate are also articulated in that sphere.

**Multicultural Citizenship:**

Most western theories of multiculturalism are silent about the inclusion of the community as a heterogeneous body. If multiculturalism is to contribute to the health and vigour of democracy, it cannot simply be about inter-group equality; it must also be sensitive to relations within the community, the intra-group equality too. In a democracy, cultural differences must not be a source of discrimination or marginalization in the public arena. The gains of citizenship should not come at the cost of erasing/damaging one’s self-identity. Since identity of a person, to some extent at least, is shaped by community affiliation, citizenship must not imply negation of those membership and identities. Multiculturalism needs, therefore, to explore ways by which the sense of alienation and disadvantage that come with being a minority are visibly diminished, but in a way that does not replace the power of the homogenizing state with that of the community. It must, therefore, aspire towards ‘a form of citizenship’ that is marked neither by a universalism generated by complete homogenization, nor by the particularism of self-identical and closed communities. “Such kind of citizenship” has been termed as “multicultural citizenship” by the theorists like Kymlicka.

Despite Will Kymlicka’s drawing attention to the fact that the connection between multiculturalism and communitarianism is (Kymlicka, 2001: 338) increasingly
unhelpful, it nevertheless remains the case that this methodological communitarianism does explain the appeal of the multiculturalists’ case across such a broad spectrum of social and philosophical theories. It can be seen especially in the case of two otherwise very different multiculturalists, Iris Marion Young and Lord Bhikhu Parekh. Young is a radical democratic theorist who has become a major figure in the political theory of multiculturalism. She argues that social groups provide the contexts within which our identities are shaped and the way those social groups are treated has a bearing on the treatment of individuals who carry those group characteristics. Her argument is that identity is a wholly social construction and that in modern pluralistic societies that construction takes place in complex overlapping contexts. People do not simply inhabit single homogeneous social groups, but are constituted by membership of overlapping groups, no one of which has an automatic precedence over any other. Having a culture is part of what distinguishes social groups from each other; but what is important is that whatever the culture is, it forms part of the context out of which identities are constructed. As such, Young confirms the primacy of the social over the individual (1990).

Bhikhu Parekh is also a radical, but his conception of culture is much less fluid than Young’s. Despite this difference, the commonality of their respective positions is revealed by the similar endorsement of the communitarian ‘social thesis’ – namely, that individual identity is shaped by and provided through membership of groups, of which cultural groups are perhaps the most important (Parekh, 1999: 163). As such, ‘culture’ provides our identities with thick contents, which one may attempt to accept or reject, but which one cannot simply ignore or deny. It is for this reason that attacks on culture or its denial constitute an attack on the persons or the bearers of that culture. Parekh often cites the example of Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses and the subsequent ‘fatwa’. He criticizes the political liberals who failed to grasp the genuine hurt felt by the Islamic world, as they had an inadequate and atomistic conception of the person as well as the ignorance of Islam. This is an illustration wherein lies the potential requirement of the concept of the ‘multicultural citizenship’, a combination of liberal as well as communitarian viewpoints. The individual’s right of choice whether to conform to or exit from his/her cultural group is the synthesizing point where these two ideologies meet. This is when the individual has the right to his/her choice as a “non-conformist member” of his/her group and get the equal
recognition and not the death-sentence, as in the case of Rushdie and Taslima Nasreen. Young and Parekh are only two possible examples from the enormous literature on multiculturalism that show why culture matters (Kelly, 2002: 6-7). They argue that culture as part of the context from which one’s identity is shaped is inseparable from which one is shaped as an individual. Both theorists extend the communitarians’ ‘social thesis’ by applying it to culture as a significant identity-conferring association, but both follow the thesis to the extent that they see group membership as prior to our individual identities. Consequently, both reject the voluntary individualism of Rawls and his followers. Even Will Kymlicka advances a version of the ‘social thesis’ in his defence of the role and significance of culture. He simply denies that this is a significant leaning to communitarianism, as this ‘social thesis’ is perfectly compatible with holding liberal political values such as the primacy of autonomy (1989 & 1995). What is distinctive about Kymlicka’s position is that he regards the ‘social thesis’ and the significance of culture in particular to be perfectly compatible with endorsing liberal values.

This brings in the second role that culture plays in multicultural arguments. Apart from providing the context from which personal and moral identity is constructed, multiculturalists such as Kymlicka see culture as providing a moral resource. Kymlicka follows Raz in being a perfectionist liberal, at least to the extent that liberalism is about autonomy, the key liberal value, encouraged and defended. Perfectionist liberals reject the narrow neutralism of Rawls and Barry as an inadequate basis for the defence of liberal values (Barry, 1995). Liberals are supposed to be neutral between differing conceptions of good life or what people consider makes their life go well. What makes a person’s life go well is ultimately something that can be endorsed from the inside by the person concerned, and if this is so then that person is entitled to have his/her choices protected from the external coercion of others or of the State. Culture, in this sense, is a moral resource as it provides the lived structure of values, beliefs and obligations that one needs in order to construct the autonomous and valuable life. Without a context of choice there would be nothing from which one could make an autonomous choice about the good life. While emphasizing that not all cultures are autonomy-facilitating and therefore deserving of liberal protection, the liberal multiculturalists are more likely to begin with a working assumption of equal value of cultures. Kymlicka presents a complex moral picture in
which culture does not provide a self-sufficient ground for value claims in that they need to satisfy the text of autonomous endorsement. But equally, autonomy does not provide a sufficient account of ethical life without the necessary input or structured moral communities and roles which are made possible by culture as intergenerational communities. The liberal perfectionists’ and liberal multiculturalists’ case for the significance of culture extends beyond the communitarian ‘social thesis’ even though it partly relies upon it. This is because the liberal multiculturalists are concerned with the nature of values and not simply with the sources of personal identity and self-hood or with social theorists’ concern with the proper method for analyzing social phenomena. The significance of culture, therefore, can be based on either a methodological presupposition, the ‘social thesis’ or on an account of the values that make possible those things regarded as good for worthwhile lives. In most multicultural theories these two approaches overlap. They are however, coupled with the concept of equality in order to give rise to the distinctive theory of multiculturalism. So, the significance of culture is not sufficient to identify a theory as multiculturalist.

Multiculturalists tend to distinguish themselves from other theorists who use the concept of culture by also claiming to be egalitarians. The respect for culture entails a duty to recognize the standing and claims of other cultures. The multiculturalist theorists think that culture is an appropriate subject for equality of concern and respect. Equality plays as complex a role in the multiculturalist theories as does the concept of culture. Liberal multiculturalists such as Kymlicka are egalitarians in the Dworkinian sense of accepting the idea of equality of concern and respect as the basis of any viable moral and political theory (2000). It still leaves open this question of ‘equality of what?’ or ‘what is it that should be distributed equally in order to secure for each person the equality of concern and respect?’ Dworkin, Rawls and most liberals are not concerned with overall equality of outcomes. They accept the view that equality is a distinctive criterion that applies to the distribution of such things as rights, welfare or resources which shape equal opportunities. As agents exercise their opportunities in different ways, they will result in unequal outcomes. However, as long as these outcomes are the result of a fair distribution, with sufficient compensation for those who as a result of natural bad luck are disadvantaged, then
any differences in outcome will not, in the relevant sense, be a concern for egalitarians.

There are a number of ways in which this conception of opportunity egalitarianism might give special protection to culture. First, it is a liberal discourse of rights, liberty and opportunity to show why cultures could be accorded respect. In this way cultures enjoy a derivative normative status, though they may enjoy a primary status on terms of social theory. But this derivative status is still enough to show the reasons for respecting cultures, and importantly in the arguments of Will Kymlicka, for creating group rights within liberal theories. The debate between Kymlicka and Kukathas over whether there are any genuine group rights, turns on the significance one attaches to this derivative quality. For Kukathas, there are no group rights as such, there are only individual rights; however, he goes on to argue that the liberal view of freedom of association is all that is necessary to provide quite robust defences of culture and group practices (1992).

A further argument used by liberal multiculturalists is that justice is achieved by the distribution of certain primary goods such as income and wealth, civil and political rights as the basis of self-respect. This is an extension of Rawls’ argument for primary goods in his theory of justice. The denial of any of these primary goods, or their unequal treatment, constitutes an injustice because it denies the equal claim or moral status of each person. If one’s culture is a condition of one’s self-identity -- and following the ‘social thesis’ considered above this is a widely held view – then one can argue that the denial of one’s culture is a significant injustice and departure from equal treatment as long as that denial is not premised on some equal protection of the person or status of others. This point can be illustrated by considering the issue of symbolic representations in the public spheres through military or police uniforms. If a member of the resident cultural minority of a society is denied access to career or other opportunities because the uniform code of that society precludes some aspect of traditional dress, such as wearing a ‘burqa’ or ‘hijab’ for Muslim women in France or for a Sikh, wearing a turban as opposed to a Stetson hat by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. If changing the uniform would not undermine the public function of the military or cause danger, then one can argue that the denial is a case of unequal treatment, because it imposes a burden of cultural denial on, for example, the Sikh
Community, which is not imposed upon others. For a Sikh, a turban is not merely a hat that can be exchanged for any other kind of headgear; it is instead an expression of religious and cultural identity and therefore something that appeals to the person’s self-respect. It may be argued in this case that extending equal opportunities or equal protection of the laws involves making group-specific exceptions to accommodate cultural differences. The rationale for not simply ignoring these cases, sometimes called ‘benign neglect’ and instead regarding them as issues of unequal treatment is that culture and its manifestation is something that goes to the heart of a person’s identity. Parallel arguments might be made with respect to the language-recognition in the public sphere. The conditions of self-respect are an important component of equal treatment, but they can result in different outcomes. Again, the issue of cultural recognition is seen to follow from the prior obligation to treat persons as equally worthy of concern and respect.

Not all multiculturalist theorists are satisfied with the liberal egalitarian reliance on equality of opportunity. For radical multiculturalists such as Iris Marion Young and Nancy Fraser (1997) the turn towards group or cultural recognition follows from the false neutrality of liberal distributive norms. Indeed, these radical theorists argue that it is liberalism’s failure to take seriously the extent to which opportunities reflect unequal power relations between the groups that creates the need for a genuinely multicultural theory. Young’s egalitarian argument can be seen as a direct critique of the liberal egalitarianism discussed above. The point of her argument, and of similar radical theorists, is that it places concern for social and cultural groups in the wrong place. The problem is not simply one of distributing rights and resources to groups and cultures in order for their members to be regarded as ‘equal’; the problem is with the underlying social norms that constitute opportunities in the first place. This matters for Young, because not all relevant denials of equal recognition take the form of overt discrimination. For example, one can discriminate against women in the workplace by not opening up job opportunities to them - for example, by reserving all senior management roles for men. Such discrimination for many years has disfigured the workplace and has been removed by changes in the laws that now offer equal protection. However, these changes have not necessarily been accompanied by greater access by women to such positions in business or government. The reason for this is that the opportunities themselves, although open to all talents, nevertheless reflect
wider patterns of social and gender expectations. Women are still seen as more likely to become the primary carers of pre-school children and therefore less committed to a career, whatever choices individual women might have made in their lives. Similarly, many opportunities reflect cultural expectations which may not be universally shared and which may systematically disadvantage certain social groups. A simple example is provided by statutory rest days which privilege the Christian Sunday over Friday and Saturday, thus disadvantaging Muslims and Jews. Even when the legislation may not have been based on religious arguments about Sunday observance, the mere fact of a convention, the origin of which is no longer considered, can still bring with it culturally based expectations but do not fall equally on all. The point here is that opportunities are never neutral but are always social constructions that carry with them inequalities of power and relations of domination and subordination. The opportunities are the issue, and not merely access to them.

How this affects the issue of multicultural politics in practice is more complex than in the case of liberal egalitarianism, as it does not merely involve the rights or resources which are distributed in order to equalize access to opportunities. Instead, the radical egalitarian is less likely to be concerned with the distribution of resources as a primary task and more likely to be concerned with the issues of group representation and proportionality. The cases of lack of group proportionality will require different and targeted political responses. What will not be sufficient is the equal distribution of rights or resources, although this may be part of the solution. Although Young’s radical egalitarian theory is not designed simply to support the claims of the traditional hierarchies of ethnic and national cultures, her arguments do assist those who wish to defend cultural difference by providing a way of defending group rights and group exemptions on the basis of egalitarian arguments. The protection of culture is a secondary outcome of her egalitarianism of social groups, not necessarily cultural ones. Her argument, like Kymlicka’s, places the idea of group membership as the centre of thinking about egalitarianism. By combining culture and egalitarianism, multiculturalism, despite its inherent diversity, attempts to challenge the dominant position of liberal multiculturalism as the only way to respond to the circumstances of multiculturalism. It is precisely this interweaving of respect for culture and the claims of egalitarianism that Brain Barry, a rational liberal, wishes to distinguish in his book *Culture and Equality* (2001).
Culture and Equality:

Barry attempts to examine the connection between the commitment to the value and role of culture and its compatibility with an equal commitment to egalitarianism. He advances the robust claim that culture and equality are fundamentally incompatible commitment and that the ‘multicultural’ turn in political theory and practice, advocated in different ways by Kymlicka, Young, Tully, Parekh and Kukathas, is ultimately an impasse. His primary concern is to provide a robust defence of egalitarian liberalism and show how this is incompatible with a commitment to cultural protection and group-specific rights and exemptions. He thinks that the multicultural preoccupation with culture is a distraction from the real source of unequal treatment and injustice. The primacy attached to culture obscures the fact that what minority groups really want are the rights and resources enjoyed by those in positions of dominance and power, rather than the protection of cultural hierarchies that benefit those who enjoy the position of cultural entrepreneurs. Thus, he does not see the critique of multiculturalism as an assault on those groups and individuals who are denied rights, opportunities and resources. The argument is about whether a new form of political theory is necessary or whether these claims can be covered by reference to liberal egalitarian norms. In order to sustain the argument that respecting and giving rights to cultures is incompatible with a commitment to equality, Barry sets about attacking the presuppositions and outcomes of multiculturist arguments. His primary task is to show that the appeal to culture either does no more work than a direct appeal to equality or else it does work but at the expense of equal or fair treatment. He means to say that the commitment to culture and equality pulls in different directions, and one must make a choice, for one cannot have both. He throws light on the self-paradoxical nature of the theory of multiculturalism. He examines multicultural arguments against the universalism of liberal egalitarianism. He makes it explicit that the emphasis on culture is redundant and has actually distorted the real issues of injustice and discrimination that are posed by the circumstances of multiculturalism. Barry is mainly concerned with exposing the apparent incoherence of the multicultural position. Barry’s liberal critique of multiculturalism claims that the theory is inherently flawed as culture and equality stand in opposition and that
multiculturalism as a new approach to the politics of ethnically plural societies is mistaken. It, in fact, replicates traditional problems about reconciling the claims of groups with the fundamental ethical status of person. Yet, as the two often clash in politics, it is precisely this which must be addressed if multiculturalism is to provide a viable way of reconciling the plurality of claims that are posed by the circumstances of multiculturalism. As the theory has begun to establish itself as a new orthodoxy, it is timely, that it should be subject to careful reconsideration. Barry’s liberal critique of multiculturalism has received the responses from the critics, both liberals and communitarians like Samuel Freeman, Susan Mendes, David Miller, Paul Kelly, James Tully, Judith Squires, Bhikhu Parekh, Clare Chambers and Chandran Kukathas with only a few sympathetic defensive arguments from Simon Caney and Jan Shapiro. The communitarians pose a robust defence against Barry’s polemical attack on multiculturalism.

Barry’s liberal response to multiculturalism in his book *Cultural and Equality* is an uncompromising and sustained attack on multiculturalism’s main theses and proponents from the perspective of the kind of egalitarian liberalism associated with John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice*. Barry has been a rationalist liberal like J S Mill and one of Rawls’ more informed and probing liberal critics. But for all his differences with Rawls, he still sees ‘Justice as fairness’ as the major statement of ‘the classical ideal of liberal citizenship’ and the egalitarian ‘demands of social and economic citizenship’ that define egalitarian liberalism. Furthermore, he sees multiculturalists as denying the equality of basic liberties and fair opportunities that define equal liberal citizenship; moreover, they even help to undermine the economic claims of the poor by trying to shift political focus away from questions of distributive justice to a ‘politics of recognition’ of different cultural groups. Some of the conservative socialist critics with a nationalist bent have also argued that multiculturalism in its most vocal form of the politics of recognition is a distraction from the far more serious issues of redistribution, and should be of no concern to progressive politics. Parekh counter-argues that the politics of redistribution and recognition are both important and need to be integrated into a coherent theory of justice (Parekh, 2006: 367). In their own different ways both the politics of redistribution and recognition are concerned with realizing freedom and equality, highlighting different threats to these and raise important questions of justice. The politics of redistribution challenges the
class bias of the state and the ways in which it legitimizes economic domination, whereas the politics of recognition challenges its cultural bias of the state and the ways in which it legitimizes cultural domination and institutionalization of identities. There are subtle and covert ways in which the exclusion or marginalization perpetuate. Far from being in conflict, the two forms of politics offer complementary insights into the structure and mechanism of inequality, and provide interdependent strategies for tackling the mutually reinforcing economic and cultural domination. It is not difficult to think of a society in which economic and other inequalities are drastically reduced or even eliminated, but which takes demeaning views of women; cultural, religious and ethnic minorities; gays; lesbians and others. After all, economic equality does not by itself generate respect for diversity. An egalitarian society might insist on only one correct way to lead the good life and its dissenting members might enjoy economic and social equality, but not the equality to define and affirm their identity. They are bound to feel oppressed in the sense that they are denied equal public respect and freedom of self-expression, are coerced into confronting to someone else’s ideas of how they should live, and are able to participate in the collective life of their society only on terms dictated by others. Injustice is done not only when the individuals are exploited, manipulated or denied the basic material conditions of the good life but also when they are denied the opportunity to speak in their own voices and freely shape and express their identities. Charles Taylor believes that non-recognition or misrecognition of their identity imprisons people into a reduced mode of being and gives rise to a deep sense of marginalization and powerlessness. Oppression and inequality can take many forms, the economic being one of them. The advocates of redistribution focus on some of these, those of recognition on others. Both articulate different forms of equality and need to be addressed by a theory of justice. Parekh propounds that the two politics are to be integrated and developed into a richer “bifocal theory of justice” (Parekh, 2008: 41-53).

One of the most persistent criticisms of liberalism is that the priority it assigns to freedom and individual rights is not only disruptive of conventional social norms but also undermines the value of community. The communitarianism that arose in the 80s is a recent response to liberalism as a political project as well as a political theory. Some communitarians like Michael Walzer and Charles Taylor are more liberal than
the ones like Alasdair Macintyre. But if anything unites communitarians, it is the conviction that basic freedoms and other requirements of liberal justice are secondary to a person’s achieving the good of community. Multiculturalism is the outcome of this non-liberal doctrine and perhaps its natural development. It is no accident that many communitarians are also theorists of multiculturalism. Like communitarians, multiculturalists insist that a person’s good is primarily defined by membership and active participation in community of some kind. But whereas communitarians’ is an ideal theory outlining the basis of social unity in terms of everyone’s pursuit of communal ends, multiculturalism takes cognizance of the fact that often there is a multiplicity of cultures existing within the same society and under one government. It then provides communitarians with a non-ideal theory which says how societies and their governments should deal with the real world of ‘difference’. Put in the simplest terms, multiculturalists advocate that achieving one’s cultural ‘identity’ is so central to a person’s good that each distinct cultural group in a multicultural society should recognize and respect the cultural practices of others and not impose its norms, particularly its liberal norms, on them. The liberal emphasis on individual’s equal freedom to find their own good makes achieving one’s cultural identity difficult, if not practically impossible, and undermines the distinctness of cultural groups. Multiculturalism prescribes the policy of not just toleration but also of accommodation of disparate cultural groups, many of which do not endorse liberal social or even political norms.

Barry in his sweeping attack dismisses multiculturalism as a muddled, incoherent and pernicious doctrine. Multiculturalism is not a homogeneous body of thought. As a political movement it is just around thirty years old, and as a theoretical exploration, it is only half as old. Unlike liberalism, it has neither founders nor canonical texts. It is not a substantive political doctrine laying down political goals. It is a philosophical perspective drawing its inspiration from a variety of sources. In addition to the widely known liberal forms of multiculturalism, there are also its conservative, Marxist, socialist and even racist and feminist versions. European multiculturalism is quite different from the American and the Australian ones and they are again different from the Indian one. Each has built up a distinct discourse on multiculturalism depending on its particular case history. Some advocates of multiculturalism are relativists, some others Universalists, yet others reject this dubious dichotomy. Some again are
individualists, some others communitarians. Yet others straddle both. Just as liberals disagree about their basic values and challenge each other’s liberal credentials, so do multiculturalists. Barry’s most trenchant criticisms are directed against the liberal communitarians like Parekh and Kymlicka who seek to accommodate multicultural aspirations. They would strongly disagree with Barry’s view that culture is only of marginal importance and that human nature is enough to explain human behaviour. Human nature never exists in its raw form and is inescapably shaped and structured by culture. Human beings are culturally embedded and live out their lives within a cultural framework. They can certainly revise, even reject, some or all aspects of their culture and fashion a new one. What they cannot do is to transcend culture altogether and live in a cultural vacuum. For these and other reasons, culture matters to human beings. It is tied up with their pride, self-respect and even identity, and deserves to be taken into account in our dealings with them. One may refuse to respect it when one has good reasons to do so, but one owes those involved a duty of explanation and justification. So, multiculturalism combinedly imbibes certain norms of both, liberalism as well as communitarianism.

**Intercultural Dialogue:**

It is because each culture is limited that the multiculturalists consider cultural diversity a vital moral good, and argue that human beings not only need a rich and thick culture in which to grow up but also access to others. By engaging in a critically sympathetic dialogue with other cultures one comes to appreciate the strengths and limitations of one’s own, becomes aware of what is distinctive to it as well as what it shares in common with them, and enjoy the opportunity to enrich ourselves by judiciously borrowing their attractive features (Parekh, 2006: 350-51). The dialogue is not just verbal, but also behavioural, articulated not only in arguments but also in an unconscious fusion of sensibilities and occurs not only among philosophers and creative writers but also in daily encounters between ordinary men and women. Individuals and communities educate and ‘civilize’ each other in subtle ways provided that they are not too opinionated and self-righteous to approach others with an open mind. Multiculturalists cherish intercultural exchanges and fusions at all levels, propose policies and institutional structures conducive to them, and expect the
state to play a judicious and supportive role. Many multiculturalists take an interactionist and integrationist rather than a static and ghettoized view of multiculturalism. For them it involves not a passive and mute coexistence of cultures and cultural communities but their interactive engagement. This is why they emphasize intercultural dialogue and make it an activating and even a founding principle of multicultural society. This does not mean that a multicultural society should force or even pressurize its cultural communities to become actively engaged with others. It does, in fact, mean that it should seek to create the conditions in which no community feels so besieged, frightened and alienated from the wider society so as to lack the confidence and the willingness to participate in the ongoing intercultural dialogue that forms the life-blood of a multicultural society and to which all its various communities are necessarily exposed. If a community still wishes to lead a relatively self-contained life with only the minimum necessary contact with others, it can. Although a culturally open way of life is in principle superior because of the intellectual and moral qualities it cultivates and the dangers of dogmatism, fundamentalism and narrow self-righteousness against which it guards. It has a greater relevance to the modern world and its culturally self-contained way of life realizes its own distinct form of goodness. All this matters much to its members, and deserves respect.

Redefining and reorienting the perspective of multiculturalism, Parekh conceptualizes it in a much clearer manner (Parekh, 2006: 369-70). He writes that the individuals are to be cherished but their cultural embeddedness is to be acknowledged without detracting from their capacity for transcendence. Equality is to be valued but a difference-sensitive view of it has to be taken and universal values are to be stressed without ignoring their inescapable cultural mediation. Parting company with the mainstream liberal tradition at a different level he argues that though the liberal way of life is a great human achievement, it does not represent the last word in human wisdom, that cultural diversity is a very vital human good, and that the political and economic institutions should be so designed as to encourage a creative interplay between different visions of good life. He also argues that moral and political discourse is conducted in different languages; that public reason is not homogeneous but plural; that the public realm should not be culturally neutral and gentle but multiculturally oriented. Citizenship in modern society requires multicultural literacy.
and sensitive appreciation of difference. The result is a complex theory of multiculturalism. Since it has a strong commitment to important liberal values, the theory is liberal in its orientation. However, since it reinterprets some of these values and introduces others drawn from other traditions, it is neither exclusively and narrowly liberal nor represents ‘expanded liberalism’. To think that it transgresses settled boundaries or to seek to fit it into liberal vs non-liberal dichotomy is to misunderstand its basic thrust. It is best seen as a multiculturally oriented account of ‘liberalism’ having a cultural basis and several historically specific ways of understanding and organizing human life, and giving it a dialogical openness it has long lacked.

**Multiculturalism and Feminism:**

The expansion of the controversial term “multiculturalism” with its political and philosophical dimensions arose partly from the changing political climate in international politics in the late 1960s and 70s and partly out of the debates surrounding minority rights and the feminist movement. In the broadening of the concept of multiculturalism to encompass the rights of minorities, the feminist movement has frequently provided a model for the resolution of apparent injustice. However, it should be noted, both in terms of conceptualizing the issues and in setting the agenda for what needs to be done, there has been a constant movement to and fro of ideas between feminists and minority rights activists and that parallels between them are no coincidence. An example of borrowing by the feminists is the idea of double consciousness taken from the black writer W.E.B Du Bois (1989), who used it to describe the way in which the blacks in the USA had two perceptions of themselves -- one which derives from their own community and its traditions, and the other from how they are perceived by the majority. As a consequence of this double consciousness, their lives were lived as a negotiation between those two perceptions, sometimes responding to the white gaze by acting in a way corresponding to its expectations, sometimes only seeming to, while at the same time guarding a sense of self-respect. Women, some feminists argued, responded in the same way to the male gaze and to a male-dominated culture.
Given the parallels in the way in which women and Asian and African ethnic minorities are configured by white male attitude, it is not surprising that in radical debates in the 1970s and 80s women and ethnic minorities would see themselves as being in very similar if not identical positions and that consequently they should employ each other’s vocabulary with reference to equality of opportunity, affirmative action, proportionate representation and educational disadvantage. As a consequence, ethnic minorities demanded that the State ought to recognize and support the value which they themselves placed on their cultures. The term ‘multiculturalism’, in the context of such debates, took on very sharply defined political connotations. Additionally, in the same way as feminism provoked a backlash, so too has multiculturalism. Both now find themselves on the same side in the debates over political correctness and its limits. After the above examination as to how precisely the discourse on multiculturalism has sharpened in the last two decades, it is high time to discuss the polemics in the feminist context as it has reached its present position. Mahajan has done so at length with considerable clarity and precision (Mahajan, 2002: 123-45).

Theorists of multiculturalism sharply disagree about which special rights should be given to whom. Nevertheless, they do agree on certain fundamentals. All of them accept that marginalized and discriminated communities/different types of minorities (religious, regional, linguistic), dalits, indigenous peoples or immigrants within the nation-state deserve special rights. At least, the identified minorities must have access to their culture and the freedom to live by the norms of their distinct way of life. This could be done by imparting importance and recognition to the cultural practices and codes, exemptions from the prevailing laws, provisions for separate self-government, or even separate representation. Whatever be the means devised within the framework of differentiated citizenship, the State and the citizens should be willing to explore options that will enable marginalized minorities to be included as equals. The unitary model of citizenship may not be adequate for accommodating subordinated groups as equal citizens. This concept is today endorsed by many feminist scholars. Yet, there are also strong reservations and apprehensions about the multicultural agenda. Feminist writings thus stand in a paradoxical relationship with multiculturalism as the maxims of multiculturalism fall short of realizing the objectives of feminism. While most of them support the concept of differentiated citizenship, there is anxiety in most
quarters that women may remain unequal and subordinated even after minority communities are empowered. This is so because the socio-cultural norms of any community, majority or minority, are generally patriarchal. As multiculturalism accords positive value to group difference, the notion of difference and group-specific rights advocated here finds a powerful and systematic defence in the contemporary feminist writing. The feminists have built up their argument on this doctrine but differ on the point of the internal homogenization that takes place within the communities.

The first wave of liberal feminists fought against existing social prejudices and division of functions by demanding political rights and opportunities for women equal to men in the public domain. Nineteenth century feminists appealed to the ideal of formal equality to challenge the exclusion of women from political and professional life. The second phase of women’s movement built upon the relative success of its first move. Having received legal and political rights, these feminists focused on the special requirements of women. They referred to the biological differences between men and women to argue that women require special treatment and with it special rights. From their point of view equal political rights were necessary but not enough in the case of women as they have special needs. They needed, on the one hand, special assistance to overcome the disadvantage they suffered on account of their subordinate position in society. On the other, as mothers or child bearers, they had special claims that the State must now address. For instance, they require maternity leave, child support, healthcare for their family, crèches at workplace and even flexible hours of work. Thus, they used the concept of difference to justify special care and welfare facilities for women (Phillips, 1992: 206-11). Subsequent writings added a new dimension to the notion of gender difference. They affirmed the ‘politics of difference’ and maintained that having the same rights as men have could never be the basis of women’s emancipation in society. These rights and opportunities ought to be accorded for their being humans/individuals. Apart from certain claims as individuals/persons, women have some specific needs different from men, due to their gender difference. Women would always remain disadvantaged in a framework that expects them to be the ‘same’ as men in the public domain. So long as they were expected to fit into slots and roles that were devised for men, they would always remain subservient to men. Women should be included as women. For the theorists of difference, what is equally important is to realize that men and women are different.
This difference needs to be acknowledged and reflected in the public domain. At the same time, they argued, incorporating women’s difference “would inevitably alter the way of thinking and open new possibilities and make oppression in socially discursive practices no longer inevitable” (Dunchen, 1986: 71). It would, at the very least, restructure the public domain by bringing feminine qualities and new principles of public ethics.

Feminist writers who emphasize the principle of difference point to the distinctiveness of women’s experiences, capabilities and perspectives and enunciate the politics of care. While they articulate the specificity of women’s experience differently, many of them draw a contrast between the violence and aggressiveness of men and the peace, joy, tenderness and receptivity of women, the features of her repressed humanity. In their view, women have a natural inclination to nurture, care and sustain life like Mother Earth and Nature. They argue that women are protectors of life. Jane Mansbridge (1996) and Carol Gilligan (1982) have applied the feminine ethic in the field of politics. Based on women’s capacity to recreate and nurture, they outline the ethics of care as opposed to the ethics of power and rights-based justice. Mansbridge argues that women are particularly sensitive to inequalities of power. At the same time, their experience of child-rearing makes them ‘especially concerned to transform “I” into “We” and to seek solutions to conflicts that accommodate diverse and often suppressed desires’ (Mansbridge, 1993: 10-15). Hence, their experiences can enrich our understanding and realization of deliberative democracy. Women’s perspectives could assist in creating a framework of democracy that requires representatives to think not only of self-interest, but of collective concerns; not only of ‘I’ but also of “We”. It could, in their words, provide a conception of politics without domination.

In many other feminist writings, women’s difference is used both to critique and to alter the norms that shape the public realm. Yet, all of them underline the need to focus on the socially constructed differences between men and women and more importantly, they point to the limits of the principle of formal equality. In their view, the language of formal equality is insensitive to the gender-specific nature of the dominant value. It fails to see the ways in which the male-dominated intellectual and political heritage has suppressed and subordinated women. It has also failed to attend
to the specificity of gender difference. It must, therefore, be abandoned in favour of a structure that acknowledges the presence of group differences. This idea that women embody a distinctive perspective -- one that can add something new and different to the existing world-view -- has transformed the thinking on group rights. It has provided a new justification for group representation and differentiated rights. By celebrating difference, hence, the feminists have embraced the very core of the multicultural doctrine but the problem lies in the method/manner of resolving/treating this issue. In sanctioning a particular cultural diversity, the multicultural policy also sanctions its inherent patriarchy which has to be negated if the women’s claims are to be approved on the basis of difference.

Radical feminists seek group representation for women on account of their difference. They maintain that men differ from women; their experiences vary. Hence, men cannot be expected to understand or defend the needs and interest of women. Even if they were to understand the other, they could not effectively represent women because there is a fundamental conflict of interests involved. So, men cannot adequately represent women. Issues of representation aside, women’s experiences and their perspectives need to be included for their distinctive quality. Women, as a group, need to be included in all deliberative bodies because they are likely to offer a new and different perspective which in itself is a valuable input in all discussions on social and political issues. The feminist critique of formal equality, its positive valuation of difference and its plea to incorporate women individuals as members/delegates of groups in various public institutions have initiated the politics of difference – a politics that is affirmed even by multiculturalism. Indeed, their arguments for special representation provide a new rationale for group-specific rights. It constructs difference as a source of desirable diversity. This association of difference with diversity and the accompanying belief that negating differences merely reinforces the privilege of the dominant groups and the discourse of minorities are the themes that multiculturalism incorporates within its framework. In fact, multiculturalism endorses the politics of difference and the claims for special group rights that are strongly voiced within feminism. The idea of difference that is central to much of contemporary feminism is also fundamental to multiculturalism. Both multiculturalism and feminism speak of the continued exclusion and marginalization of some groups from the public domain. They point to the biases inherent in theories
that claim to be neutral or universalistic, and reveal the limitations of the liberal understanding of equality as sameness. As both approach the world from the vantage point of difference, they seek, in their own ways, respect for difference. Difference or ‘foreignness’, they maintain, should not be perceived as a threat or hostility. Finally, both multiculturalism and feminist theories of difference argue that a system of individual rights is insufficient to overcome the marginalization of minority groups. We require special rights to attend to the specific needs of these vulnerable groups, and to ensure that difference is not a source of discrimination in society.

Yet, despite the shared commitment to the value of difference, women’s group and analysts are among the most eloquent critics of multiculturalism. Despite their anxieties about liberal theory and their recommendations for special group rights, at least some feminists maintain that multiculturalism is bad for feminism. They feel that the limited gains that have been achieved by women’s movements might be null and void if the multicultural agenda is accepted. In the words of Susan Moller Okin, ‘When minority cultures win group rights, women lose out’ (Okin, 1997: 25-28). Okin’s perception derives from her analysis that women occupy a secondary position in most minority cultures. Under these circumstances, special rights to minority cultures may easily justify prevailing community practices that discriminate against women. In critiquing multiculturalism, Okin and several other feminists single out gender discrimination that exists in minority communities. It is important to assert that majority cultures are also not devoid of patriarchal domination. Gender discrimination exists in all the cultures of the majority too, and it is stressed that women in liberal societies are also victims of unfair treatment. While minority communities alone cannot be accused of perpetuating gender injustices, the issues that these critics have raised, and those that have emerged from the experiences and struggles of women everywhere, cannot be ignored or dismissed. They need to be not only considered/addressed seriously but also tackled with focused efforts in a democratic polity committed to ensuring that no one is discriminated against on account of one’s ascribed social identities. The issues raised in feminist scholarship are particularly significant because they come primarily from the perspective of difference. The multicultural reading of culture, community and differences leaves many structures of discrimination untouched, and it is to draw attention to this dimension that the agenda of multiculturalism is interrogated.
Feminist Critiques of Multiculturalism:

Mahajan throws light on the feminist critiques of multiculturalism (Mahajan, 2002: 130-45). The argument has three important facets –

(1) For feminist theorists perhaps the most significant drawback of multiculturalism is that it addresses the issues of inter-group equality but has not brought into its purview the issues of intra-group equality. Like liberalism, it discusses the issue of justice with reference to the inequalities that exist in the public domain. Discrimination that occurs in the private domain, or in the sphere of the family, inexplicably remains a non-issue within the multicultural framework. Multiculturalism deals with discrimination of minority communities in the public domain but the marginalization and subordination of some groups within the community has not yet drawn the attention of the theorists of multiculturalism. In fact, through a system of special cultural rights for communities, it leaves the private sphere almost entirely in the hands of the community and untouched by the State. This affects the lives of women so much so that they are disadvantaged from various points of view like the definition of their social roles, division of labour etc. In the process of the cultural discrimination within the nation-state, each culture has been essentialised and presented as a homogeneous and univocal entity having clearly prescribed practices and norms. The presumed univocality of a culture becomes a matter of concern as it tends to privilege the prevailing community’s patriarchal practices. When prevalent observances of a community become the markers of group identity, the resistance to them becomes extremely difficult. Even though multiculturalists are not unaware of the presence of internal plurality, this dimension remains unrepresented within their framework of cultural differences. It is a major shortfall of multiculturalism that it presents operating practices as being collectively valued, endorsed by the community members and sanctioned by the tradition; it neglects the disputes that exist around those community practices. It overlooks the fact that tradition is open to interpretation; it is multivocal and can be subjected to a variety of different constructions. It has been strangely out of its sight that culture can, however, be viewed as an arena of contested meanings and practices. The fact cannot
be ignored that the tradition is a socially and historically constructed object. The construction of tradition occurs on account of the presumed homogeneity that serves the interests of patriarchy and eventually disadvantages women. What is represented within the multicultural framework as a sacred practice, for instance, the practice of ‘Sati’, defining the cultural community identity of the Hindus – gets converted into a practice that can be questioned and discussed. The representation of such reified and concretized cultural practices as points of conflict creates room for the expression of internal dissent. The multicultural perspective, by comparison, supports preservation of practices, even if disadvantageous to individuals and closes/erodes the space for the expression of difference, a paradox in itself. What is more vital is that external as well as internal differences must be viewed as being socially and politically constructed and need to be located in the contexts of time and history. If this dimension is not looked into, then multiculturalism is likely to sanction all prevailing practices, including those that express gender-discrimination and perpetuate the subordination of women. For instance, the practice of ‘purdah’ or ‘burqa’ for women in Muslim communities that discriminates the females has to be accepted as part of the diversity. In another example, the Parsee minority community is divided on the issue of excommunication of the Parsee girls and not the boys in the cases of interfaith marriages, a taboo in this endogamic community. If the constructed nature of such differences and diversity is missed by multiculturalism, then it may lose sight of the complex processes by which homogenization occurs within the nation-state. And this needs to be emphasized because in multiculturalism, diversity is most often equated and misunderstood with the mere presence of heterogeneity.

Against the homogenizing agenda of the nation-state, multiculturalism argues for accommodation of community codes, institutions and practices within the public sphere. Here, the presence of many diverse community codes is itself taken as an evidence of desirable diversity. This perception of diversity has led many Indian feminists to conclude that the formulation of a uniform civil code may be a means of homogenization by assimilating communities into the culture of the majority. The association of uniformity with homogenization has thus strongly supported for the continuance of the community’s Personal Laws. The presence of multiple community codes is seen as an expression of diversity and has been defended on that ground. What is consequently oversighted in this perception is the fact that the prevailing
diversity is itself a political construct, and that it too acts as an instrument of homogenization. Against the implementation of a uniform code, the presence of multiple codes may appear as a sign of heterogeneity but if the community codes are seen as historical objects and political constructs, it becomes evident that each code has emerged by erasing differences that existed within the community. Different practices that governed issues of family, marriage, divorce and inheritance across regions, castes and class have been obliterated to construct a Personal Law that applies uniformly to people belonging to a specific community in India. Thus, the apparent diversity of forms and codes in the public sphere camouflages the erosion of internal diversity and variation. In the case of Hindu community, the non-inclusion of other castes itself meant that their practices remained excluded and the Brahminical tradition prevailed over all others. Even within this group there were differences in interpretation of texts. However, as a homogeneous code for the entire community emerged, these differences of readings were also set aside. The Hindu Personal Law came into existence through a series of erasures and at each stage, heterogeneity had to make way for the enunciation of a coherent and homogeneous Personal Law (Mani, 1985). The process of codification of the Hindu Personal Law serves to illustrate the ways in which homogeneity prevailed as diverse community codes came into existence. The emergence of community Personal Laws has ‘helped to homogenize five fixed identities’ in the form of Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Parsee and Jew (Sangari, 1999: 24-30). For purposes of family affairs, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists have been included within the category of Hindu, and accordingly, they are governed by the Hindu Personal Law. Even though each of these communities asserts its separate identity and represents itself as a distinct religious group, the Hindu Personal Law obliterates these distinctions and imposes another overpowering identity within which the individually of each of these communities is submerged. Such aspects involved in the construction of cultural diversity have, however, not received much attention in multiculturalism. Contemporary theorists have remained inattentive to the concerns of heterogeneity and equality within the community. Mahajan opines,

If heterogeneity is to be protected at all levels, across communities and within communities, and if practices are to be instituted in a way that they do not become a source of further discrimination, culture and communities are to be viewed as historical objects. Only when they are seen in this non-essentialising
manner is there a possibility of carrying forward the agenda of democratic citizenship (Mahajan, 2002: 135).

(2) Multiculturalism is enunciated on the concept that the individuals are embedded in a specific community. It sees individuals as members of a given cultural community and assumes that their lives are shaped by the cultures in which they live. Several feminist writers argue that this conception of the self ignores ‘hybridity’ as an experience. It does not take cognizance of the fact that in the modern world people, particularly women; find themselves inhabiting many different cultures. They see themselves caught between multiple cultures, and, in the case of many Asian and Islamic societies, they often find membership of the traditional culture as being restrictive and oppressive. In presenting the alternative picture of diversity and cultural memberships, most feminists accept that community locations do matter, and must be considered. The struggle for women’s rights and equality cannot be delinked from their membership to other communities. However, from their perspective, recognizing the significance of community membership does not imply preserving that identity. It is quite probable that even though people derive their history and obligations from membership in a community, they may still like to reconsider these inheritances. They may, therefore, seek the option of choosing communities and group memberships. Instead of preserving and protecting their received identities, they might wish to relinquish them or even take up new identities. So, acknowledging the role of cultural communities and their histories does not necessarily sanction the need to preserve cultures.

There is also one more question whether the cultures which people do not wish to preserve or those that they themselves find oppressive are to be preserved (Gutmann, 1994: 6-7). Looking at the unequal position of women in society and in almost all cultures, several critics ask whether rights should be given to uphold what people cherish or what they have inherited on account of their history and tradition. In fact, the attempt to justify cultural practices for the sake of protecting an identity or promoting diversity has met with a lot of resistance and has been subjected to a repeated interrogation. For the liberal feminists, this has been a complicated matter of grave concern because cultural differences and diversity have often been an excuse for cruelty and injustice. They have been a means of legitimizing oppressive
practices; most often practices that allow communities to control and oppress women. For example, the ‘Shariyat’ of the Islam under which the women who are the victims of crime get even a harder punishment than the criminal men. The ‘legitimized’ oppressive practices become the tools in the hands of defence lawyers for explaining away violence towards women and seeking a reduced and lenient sentence for the male offenders belonging to cultural minorities. The shortcomings of the multicultural agenda, here, are on account of the ways in which multiculturalism has been, and can be, appropriated to the disadvantage of women. Although theories of multiculturalism are not against the concerns of gender equality, the feminist critique has the apprehensions that these concerns cannot be accommodated within a framework that aims to preserve cultures. Almost all cultures, majority as well as minority, are embedded in patriarchy. They endorse, in various ways and degrees, the subjugation of women. The subdued and docile women conforming to the social norms and practices of their community are considered ‘cultured’. Most ‘culturally sanctioned’ customs make women subservient to men. They deny her the agency and control over her own person, self and body. Under these circumstances, the multicultural agenda of preserving cultures is likely to perpetuate the oppression of women. In fact, a few feminist scholars point out that it is necessary to respect only those practices within cultures that are supportive of the goal of promoting the ideal of equal citizenship. Multiculturalism is, however, reluctant to make distinctions of this kind as they may be controversial and relative. While it applies the concept of difference to question the hegemony of dominant perspective, what is problematic is that it makes a deliberate effort to ‘preserve’ cultural community practices and considers the presence of difference as positively liberating. But the truth is that it reinforces the injustice and oppression as it does not interrogate the power-relations that are at work in the diversity that exists.

(3) Issues of discrimination within the community have so far received inadequate attention within the conceptual framework of multiculturalism. As and when these questions have been raised, they have been readily dismissed on the assumption that gender inequalities and other forms of discrimination within the community would come to an end when the communities have the right to manage their own affairs. Time and again, it is argued that the State must refrain from interfering in the affairs of the community. Instead of reforming and modernizing the community by imposing
its will, the State should allow the communities to govern their own affairs and
determine their Personal Laws (Chatterjee, 1994: 1768-77). In the recent past, these
claims were strongly asserted in the events that followed the Shah Bano case. When
the Supreme Court of India ruled in favour of Shah Bano, a 65-year old Muslim
divorcee, who had appealed for child support and maintenance from her ex-husband,
the judgement came under severe criticism from the community leadership and
political representatives. Although strong condemnation was, to some extent,
provoked by the court’s comments on the discriminatory practices within Islamic
Law, the community spokespersons criticized the judgment for legislating upon
matters of Muslim Personal Law. Even though personal laws of all communities
disadvantage women, and Shah Bano, like many other women of her community, was
vulnerable within the existing structures of community laws and institutions, this
dimension received little attention. In the debate on the right to culture of the
minorities, a dichotomy was posited between the State and the community and this
invariably marginalized the goal of women’s equality. Shah Bano’s struggle for her
rights, therefore, took a backseat as the right of the community to protect and preserve
its culture was accepted. The community did receive priority; cultural practices were
certainly protected but only at the expense of subordinating women.

The fact that women are rarely ever represented in community institutions, and that
community structures on which the multiculturalists pin their hopes currently function
in a way that undermine women’s rights, are the factors often neglected. It is believed
that institutions within the community need to be activated, and when this happens,
there will indeed be an opportunity for all to influence and shape the decisions
collectively. This is the ideal pattern of decision-making in democracy. It is the
communities’ moral responsibility to initiate the desirable process of internal
democratization because that follows from their rationale on which their own claims
for special rights are based. If they expect rights to protect their difference then they
must also allow space for expression of internal differences (Bhargava, 1991: 165-
71). If the communities justify their demand for special representation on grounds of
their marginalization and exclusion from the public sphere, then they must also
acknowledge the rights of subordinated/minoritized/resistant groups within the
community for the same representation. The reforms for internal democratization
should be initiated by the community and that its cultural claims should have the
support and consent of all members of the community. Such a liberal democratic notion offers a convincing way of negotiating the current knots between multiculturalism and liberalism. This is just a liberal democratic procedure of decision-making in a community; though it does not endorse any liberal values. It allows the communities to justifiably claim a right to their own culture and at the same time, it assures the liberal critics that the rights that enable communities to protect their way of life will not reinforce the hegemony of the dominant groups within the community; nor will they institutionalize practices that are seen as being oppressive by some of the community members. There is no doubt that democratization of communities is desirable, and that communities should also recognize the implicit ethical commitment to this when they seek special rights for themselves.

Multiculturalism examines the caveat that is posed to it by the State that is actively seeking to assimilate or annihilate a particular identity. It does not explore the equally important caution that is posed by a community that does not allow its members to exercise their option to deviate from the received way of life. Communities are generally tyrannically overbearing, not by denying individuals the rights to exit, but by imposing a very heavy cost for differing from the accepted way of life. For people who value their community identity and see themselves as a part of that collectivity, ex-communication or forced exit from the community is often the hardest punishment. It is this domineering attitude that is challenged even when the individuals deviate from a community’s accepted codes. It is, therefore, of the utmost significance that valuing a community identity must not become a way of closing options and choices and thus erasing spaces for the members. Indeed, since the community membership is crucial to the identity of the self, individual members should have the options or choice of differing while belonging to a community. This may not, however, be possible in the present multicultural framework where identity and community membership are associated with a definite way of life; or where protecting a way of life is of highest priority and rights are given to a community to realize the goal. It is, in fact, this specific kind of “non-conformist membership” which multiculturalism must aim to.
NOTES:

1. The particular cultural values are enhanced on the following three conditions:

   (i) The basic rights of all citizens — including freedom of speech, thought, religion and association — must be protected.
   (ii) No one is coerced or manipulated into accepting the cultural values that are represented by public institutions.
   (iii) The public officials and institutions that make cultural choices are democratically accountable, not only in principle but also in practice (Gutmann, 99-103).

2. The three forms Bhargava describes are as following (Bhargava, 85):

   (i) The first moment in this dialectic is the moment of “particularized hierarchy” characterized by a dominant community to which other communities are subordinate. Here, we have two or more communities in a hierarchical relationship — a dominant community to which other communities are subordinate. Differences between cultural communities are maintained but only within this relationship of subordination. The only way in which difference is sustained is by treating communities unequally.

   (ii) The second moment may be named as the moment of “universalistic equality”. The only way to sustain equality here is to deny the significance of cultural difference. People are equal because their membership in a cultural community is deemed inconsequential. Rather, what matters is their status as individuals and their membership in an abstracted political community.
(iii) The third moment may be termed as the moment of “particularized equality”. Here people are different but equal. Membership in a particular cultural group is important but so is the relationship of equality among different cultural communities.

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