CHAPTER-I

INTRODUCTION

We are in the era of feminisms- the movement has undergone so many versions and is not restricted to the first or second wave only. Over the centuries and in different countries, women have articulated their deep concerns for their sex, their oppression, their needs and their hopes for the future as women and equal citizens in their societies. While women in other countries had different experiences and definitions, in England, even until the 1960s the word ‘feminist’ was usually pejorative. The American feminist Estelle Freedman argues that right from its origins, the word has carried negative connotations that surprisingly few politically engaged women have styled themselves feminists. (Walters 2005:3)

Some of the first European women to speak out for themselves and for their sex did so within a religious framework and in religious term. Hildegard of Bingen (11th century) (known as a remarkable and impressive writer and musician) ventured into preaching even though at that time only priests were allowed to preach. Julian of Norwich in the early 15th century raised the questions of equality and asked, “Just because I am a woman, must I therefore believe that I must not tell you about the goodness of
God….?” (ibidem 7). By the late 16th century many other women were beginning to argue their case more consistently and more aggressively, though it was in a religious framework. However, though the reformation did bring education opportunities to women, any woman who wanted to defend her sex had to confront negative descriptions and scriptural images of women: Delilah was treacherous, Jezebel murderous, and even Eve was portrayed as being responsible for the Fall of Man and the human race. Saint Paul himself was against women who spoke out or asked awkward questions about the church and her attitude towards women. In his letter of the Corinthians, he says, “Let your women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted to them to speak” (ibidem 9). The gradual move of few women to defy these scriptural prohibitions and negative images was through interpretations of the Bible. The 17th century still saw women being condemned to death for witchcraft and being crazy. But there were political implications to the outburst of religious fervour. The Anabaptists recognized women as being equal to men and allowed them to pray and speak at meetings. The Quakers encouraged women to develop their skills as administrators.

Secular self assertion developed more slowly as it was one thing to act in unfeminine ways if divinely inspired but not easy to act
unconventionally out of personal ambition or beliefs. Mary Estell was perhaps the first English writer to explore and assert ideas about women which we can still recognize and respond to as she identified with and spoke directly to other women and shared their problems. Mary Wollstonecraft was one of the first English women to write eloquently and at times angrily about the rights of women and the discrimination of women. In her *A Vindication of the rights of women* (1792), she states:

> If the abstract rights of man will bear discussion and explanation, those of women by a parity of reasoning, will not shrink from the same test...who made man the exclusive judge if women partake with him the gift of reason? (qtd in Walters 33)

She stressed on the fact that in the age that she lived, women were inferior because they were oppressed from birth, uneducated and insulated and sheltered from problems of the real world. She echoed what is still so relevant to feminism today that men and women must be educated by the opinions and manners of the society they live in and believed that without a radical change in society there can be no real revolution in female manners.
The 19th century was a period that saw an increasing widespread and articulate statement of women’s claims for equality and liberty and by the second half of the century the movement became more organized as a campaign, especially for better education, right to work outside their home and a reform for laws affecting married women and right to vote. In the 19th century United States feminism emerged out of the anti-slavery movement, in which women were very active. When women were banned from taking part in the anti-slavery debate, Elizabeth Stanton and Lucretia Mott became leading feminists who organized the women’s convention and campaigned for rights, including the political right to vote for both women and blacks. Sojourner Truth who herself was a former slave spoke out angrily after the Civil War and the emancipation for slaves, when the right to vote was only given to former male slaves and not to the women, who had participated with equal fervour. After a long struggle for the right to vote, the effect of the First World War has a huge impact on the minds of the society, in the words of Christabel Pankhurst who said the war was “God’s vengeance upon the people who held women in subjection” (ibidem 85). It was only in 1918, women over the age of 30 were given the right to vote and in 1928 they finally won it on equal terms with men.
What is sometimes termed ‘second-wave’ feminism emerged, after the Second World War, in several countries. In 1947, a commission on the Status of Women was established by the United Nations, and two years later it issued a Declaration of Human Rights, which both acknowledged that men and women had equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution, as well as women’s entitlement to ‘special care and assistance’ in their role as mothers. Between 1975 and 1985, the UN called three international conferences on women’s issues, in Mexico City, Copenhagen, and Nairobi, where it was acknowledged that feminism constitutes the political expression of the concerns and interests of women from different regions, classes, nationalities, and ethnic backgrounds....There is and must be a diversity in feminism, responsive to the different needs and concerns of different women, and defined by them for themselves.(ibidem 97)

African women offered a salutary reminder that

Women are also members of classes and countries that dominate others...contrary to the best intentions of ‘sisterhood’, not all women share identical interests. (qtd in Walters)
One of the most influential was, and remains, the French writer Simone de Beauvoir and her work, *The Second Sex* (1949). Within Western feminism or Women’s Liberation as it soon came to be called—there was initially, at least, great variety, and an energy that sprang in part from anger at having been excluded in existing leftist groups, in part from fruitful disagreements within the emerging movement itself. In America, expressions of feminism ranged from Gloria Steinem’s accessible and glossy *Ms* magazine, first published in 1970, to the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers. In her book *Sexual Politics* (1970), Kate Millett set out to analyze patriarchy as a political institution. Politics, she insists, refers to all power structured relationships, and the one between the sexes is a relationship of dominance and subordinance which has been largely unexamined. Women are simultaneously idolized and patronized, she argued, backing up her thesis with a scathing analysis of the patriarchal attitudes of writers from different periods and cultures like Freud, D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer and Jean Genet. She saw little immediate hope for women; “it may be that we shall...be able to retire sex from the harsh realities of politics” she concluded, “but not until we have created a world we can bear out of the desert we inhabit” (*ibidem* 105-6).

Other political statements included the American Shulamith Firestone’s *The
Dialectic of Sex (1970), which argued that the basic division, the most profound oppression, in society was not class but sex; she hoped for a true ‘feminist revolution’, but argued that revolution would demand

An analysis of the dynamics of sex was as comprehensive as the Marx-Engels analysis of class antagonism was for the economic revolution. More comprehensive, for we are dealing with a larger problem, with an oppression that goes beyond recorded history to the animal kingdom itself. (qtd in Walters 106)

In England, the Australian-born Germaine Greer’s provocative The Female Eunuch (1970) challenged the ‘sense of inferiority or natural dependence’ which women have too often accepted placidly, passively, allowing it to distort and impoverish their lives. The middle-class myth of love and marriage; on which being ‘an object of male fantasy’ actually desexualizes women, and on the way ‘cooking, clothes, beauty and housekeeping’ can become compulsive, anxiety-producing activities. One of the most urgent concerns of second-wave feminism has been a woman’s rights over her own body. Western feminists have often addressed questions about beauty and the value placed on a woman’s external appearance. Driven by the tantalizingly glamorous media images, many
seek refuge in an anxious, often ruinously expensive, pursuit of the latest fashion. Others turn to more desperate and self-destructive measures: dieting often turns to the point of anorexia or at other times seeking the beauty of self-mutilation that is cosmetic surgery.

Susie Orbach’s *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1981) and Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth* (1990) explore the physical self-hatred and the fear of ageing that plague so many contemporary women. And even in the affluent West, women have had to fight hard for the right to better health care: for adequate gynaecological advice and care in childbirth, for the right to contraception and, if necessary, abortion; and for more attention to those cancers, of the breast and the womb, for example, that particularly affect women.

‘Sisterhood is powerful’ was one of the most popular feminist slogans in the 1960s and 1970s. But the phrase has been questioned, and sometimes contested, both at the same time. As the black American poet Audre Lorde argued, it glosses over difference of race, sexuality, class and age...Advocating the mere tolerance of difference between the women is the grossest reformism.
It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. (ibidem 117)

Her concerns were echoed by Len Ang, an Australian of Chinese descent, who suggested that the inevitable moments of failure of communication between feminists should be accepted as the starting point for a more modest feminism, One which is predicated on the fundamental limits to the very idea of sisterhood...we would gain more from acknowledging and confronting the stubborn solidity of ‘communication barriers’ than from rushing to break them down in the name of an idealized unity. (ibidem)

Both writers believe that white middle-class women often seem to be dictating a feminism that concentrates on gender discrimination, while tending to overlook for example, the class differences and racial discrimination that complicates ideas about gender. Brazilian women have argued that feminism is ‘eurocentric’, that it has nothing to say to them about urgent local problems: racial violence and health issues, as well as difficulties black women may encounter when looking for work. Indeed, some Latin American women actually reject the word ‘feminism’. There is also an increasing recognition that, whereas Western feminists have
struggled against sexism, and against social and political inequalities, women in the ‘Third World’ have had to confront additional, and even more intractable problems. They often have to combat sexism in the form of deep-rooted local beliefs and practices, to do with class, caste, religion, and ethnic biases. In some countries, their battle with these issues have been combined with, and sometimes complicated by a struggle for the establishment of democratic government and for the most basic freedoms.

The term ‘Third World’ is widely used in contemporary feminist and postcolonial studies; but it is fraught with difficulties. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, for instance, defines it geographically: ‘the nation states of Latin America, the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, South and South-East Asia, China, South Africa, and Oceania’; she also includes black, Asian, Latino, and indigenous people living in the ‘West’. But the phrase is sometimes seen as a pejorative label, implying ‘underdeveloped’ or ‘undemocratic’ when used by Westerners. Some references to ‘Third World women’ are, indeed, a ‘polite’ way of saying ‘women of colour’, implying a native ‘other’ in contrast to the ‘norm’ of Western feminism, and it is sometimes considered more ‘correct’ to define it as ‘postcolonial feminism’. This is a powerful reminder to western feminists of how little they know about the reality of these women’s lives, and the complications of deep-rooted local
beliefs, by practices arising out of class differences, caste, religion, ethnic origins and also by the legacy of colonialism.

Nevertheless, the fascinating history of feminism in Latin American countries is noteworthy. In Mexico, for example, the ‘first wave’ of feminism was born during the revolution against the hated dictatorship of President Porfirio Diaz, a bitter struggle that continued between 1910 and 1918. Women took an active part in the struggle against the tyranny. *Solderas* established camps, foraged for food, cooked, and looked after the wounded; but there were also female soldiers, who actively took up arms. Some, dressed in skirts and their best jewellery, followed the men into battle. Others were accused becoming masculine, ‘both inwardly and outwardly’, though it was admitted that a woman could at the hour of combat prove with weapon at hand that she was no longer a *soldera*, but a soldier. This kind of feminism born in Mexico finds an echo in the Naga women revolutionaries who carried out almost the same activities in the Indo-Naga war which began in the 1950s in the jungles of Nagaland. The fervour for freedom burnt inside their hearts as they witnessed their men killed, their villages razed and burnt to the ground, their granaries and hard labour vanished in the sadistic fires by the Indian army and they
themselves, their daughters, mothers and sister, raped, molested and often killed.

The continuous rise in atrocities and violence against women has become a global concern and the age-old phenomenon is assuming new shapes and dimensions in various climes and times. The movement in third world countries called third world feminism has multiple essences covering multiple issues related to women oppression/subjugation and to thwart the colonizing forces. There have been several strategies culminating in diverse shapes of feminism. Women in the third world are most insecure facing multiple kinds of atrocities and in Islamic and African countries, there are the most harming elements that impede the peace, prosperity and stability of women’s existence. The Eurocentric existence and dominance of feminism is no more influential and the struggle for the cause of women’s liberation has been very dominant in the third world countries.

In tribal communities in the Northeast region of India, there exists today, a strong movement by women groups and women organizations for redefinition of their rights and liberties which have been put in direct conflict by patriarchal structures of tribal society. With issues of denial of women’s rights over land, inheritance and other resources, the questions of development that has for so long been exclusive is being raised by many
writers. The Naga women’s struggle for political space in decision making bodies and governance has become a force to be reckoned with in Naga tribal society. Age-old customs and practices of negation of women’s rights and subjugation of women is being questioned by activists and feminist thinkers of the younger Naga generation. The conflict of customary laws and social practices which do not recognize the rights of women and legal and constitutional mandatory laws and international conventions on gender equity have brought the gender debate into sharp focus among the Nagas.

The present study examining and comparing the feminist and womanist concerns of Alice Walker and select contemporary Naga women writers has highlighted some significant issues including a new form of feminism opposing the matriarchal dominance over the women. The matriarchal support of patriarchy neglecting the women and the consequent women’s struggle for liberation from the matriarchal domination supporting patriarchy is a new form of feminism delineated in Easterine Iralu’s *A Terrible Matriarchy*, where a Naga grandmother severely neglects and oppresses the girl child and fosters the male children with wholehearted blind support which upsets and asphyxiates the girl child traumatically. This form of feminism is being articulated by younger women writers both in
fiction and poetry, where the stoic silence and acceptance and support of patriarchy is being questioned.

Day by day atrocity on women has been multiplying and the age-old phenomenon is assuming new shapes and dimensions in various climes and times. The movement in third world countries called third world feminism has multiple essences covering multiple issues related to women oppression/ subjugation and to thwart the colonizing forces. There have been several strategies culminating in diverse shapes of feminism. Women in the third world are most insecure facing multiple kinds of atrocities and in Islamic and African countries, there are the most harming elements that impede the peace, prosperity and stability of women’s existence. The Eurocentric existence and dominance of feminism is no more influential and the struggle for the cause of women’s liberation has been very dominant in the third world countries.

The topic of research is a combination of theory, praxis and practice to examine the feminist projects, revolutions and drawbacks/ hindrances impeding the movement to a grand success. Women oppression and the efforts for their liberation is the age-old predicament and it does not have a permanent solution so far. The patriarchal domination is extreme and unbearable and as such women all over the world are suffering more and
more. Equality of rights and so many issues relating to women’s welfare have been discussed, the feminist movements have taken place in many different forms, but so far there is no permanent settlement of the issues. As such the present research aims at analyzing issues combining theory, praxis and practices in different milieus. The coined topic ‘feminist pragmatism’ is deliberate combination of theoretical and practical ways to highlight the women’s eternal subalternity. The feminist movement has achieved a lot. Women of today in all the countries have advanced many steps. But we can’t claim that they are fully liberated from the age-old domination. The term ‘pragmatism’ means thinking about solving problems in a practical and sensible way rather than by having fixed ideas and theories. Our feminist and womanist writers and activists have presented the praxis of feminist issues in their works and at many places they have suggested the practical ways for the liberation of women from their subalternity. The present study thus has combined theory and practical and sensible ways to solve the problems relating to women’s eternal subjugation and predicament. The work is a comparative analysis of feminisms prevalent among the African American and Naga women as is narrated by Alice Walker and contemporary Naga Women writers. Alice Walker used the term “womanism” to describe black feminism or feminism
of colour. But feminism, black feminism and womanism do not mean the same. Womanism was in use during the 19th century, though its use in the current sense came into being from 1984. Alice Walker is the first to use the term to describe black feminism or feminism of color. Womanism can be defined as a

Theoretical perspective focused on the experiences and knowledge bases of Black women [which] recognizes and interrogates the social realities of slavery, segregation, sexism, and economic exploitation this group has experienced during its history in the United States. Furthermore, womanism examines these realities and Black women’s responses without viewing them as a variation on or derivation of Black male or White female behavior and social circumstances. (Wikipedia)

An important aspect of womanism is the fundamental focus on racial inequalities. All Black women are not womanist as all women are not feminists. Black womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom. Womanism provides equal and viable representation of Black male struggles. It encompasses Black gendered struggles while possessing associative commonalities with the separate notions of
feminism, Black feminism, Africana Womanism and secular womanism. Alice Walker explains the womanist commitment and its essence of loving “other women sexually and non-sexually” in her *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983:12). Womanism emerged from the Black feminist recognition of the ignorance of racial struggles in the first and second wave of feminism due to factors like deliberate neglect, racism and perpetuation of the white women’s agenda. Really the Black women are less likely than white women to be identified as feminists. That is why womanism is different from the traditional notions of feminism. The lack of anti-racist ideologies and doctrines within the first and second wave of feminism made women of colour feel severely othered, painfully invisible and underrepresented.

Womanism purports a racial framing of black gendered struggles whereas Black feminism constitutes a national alignment to gendered Black politics. Africana Womanism can be viewed as an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. Grounded in African culture it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women. It addresses the dynamics of the conflict between the mainstream feminist, the Black feminist and African womanist. The Africana Womanism and its agenda are unique and separate from both
White feminism and Black feminism. Thus womanism is a form of feminism but not fully the same as feminism and it chiefly celebrates womanhood and African American women’s strength and experiences, and expresses a belief in or respect for women and their talents and abilities beyond the boundaries of race and class.

Women across the globe through the years from time immemorial have been the worst sufferers of the patriarchal/matriarchal dominance because of their tolerance, humility, sincerity and strong devotion for loving and caring children and family. Women’s subjugation is as old as humanity. A woman is presented as physically, mentally and morally weak. Across centuries the words ‘feminism’ and ‘feminist’ have been interpreted in different ways. If not much in the third world countries, consciousness and revolts demanding women’s rights arose in other continents including Europe and that has helped boosting their status though not fully uprooted their griefs and sufferings altogether. After the Second World War emerged the second wave feminism when Simon de Beauvoir insisted ‘one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’ (Walters 98). So a woman can change her condition if she so desires and becomes bold. There is no salvation only in love. So Beauvoir presents an image of ‘the independent woman’
...wants to be active, a taker, and refuses the passivity man means to impose on her. The modern woman accepts masculine values; she prides herself on thinking, taking action, working, creating on the same terms as man. (qtd. in Walters 98)

She also objects to man’s manipulation in interpretation of values which have prevailed over the confused forces of life. This manipulation has subdued Nature and Woman. Beauvoir also argues that Woman stands for Nature, Mystery, the non-human and “what she represents is more important than what she is, what she herself experiences”(ibidem). Femininity is a kind of myth invented by men to confine women to their oppressed state. So women should make themselves full scale human beings. Only asserting themselves is of no use and it would not free them of their subalternity or marginal status.

Feminism in the United States has never emerged from women who are most victimized by sexist oppression, women who are daily beaten down, mentally, physically and spiritually-women who are powerless to change their condition in life. They are a silent majority. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminist Mystique* is still heralded as having paved the way for contemporary feminist movement- it was written as if these women did not exist. Friedan’s famous phrase ,”the problem that has no name”(Walters
102) often quoted to describe the condition of women in this society actually referred to the college educated, middle and upper class, married white women- housewives who wanted more out of life. She did not speak of the needs of women without men, without children, without homes. She ignored the existence of all non-white women and poor white women. When she wrote *The Feminist Mystique*, more than one third of all women were in the work force. Friedan is a principal shaper of contemporary feminist thought. Significantly the one dimensional perspective on women’s reality presented in her book became a marked feature of the contemporary feminist movement. White women who dominate feminist discourse today rarely question whether or not their perspective on women’s reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group. Racism abounds in the writings of white feminists reinforcing white supremacy and negating the possibility that women will bond politically across ethnic and racial boundaries. Past feminist refusal to draw attention to the racial hierarchies suppressed the link between race and class. Yet class structure in American society has been shaped by the racial politics of white supremacy. White women who dominate feminist discourse who for the most part make and articulate feminist theory, have little or no understanding of white supremacy as a racial politics, of the psychological
impact of class, of the political status within a racist, sexist, capitalist state. It is this lack of awareness that leads Leah Fritz to write in *Dreamer and Dealers*, a discussion of the current women’s movement published in 1979: "Women suffering under sexist tyranny is a common bond among all women, transcending the particulars of the different forms that tyranny takes. Suffering cannot be measured and compared" (Hooks 2000:134). A central tenet of modern feminist though has been the assertion that all women are oppressed. This assertion implies that women share a common lot that factors like class, race, religion, sexual preference etc. do not create a diversity of experience that determines in which sexism will be an oppressive force in the lives of individual women. Sexism as a system of domination is institutionalized but it has never determined in an absolute way the fate of all women in the society. Being oppressed means the absence of choices—which is the primary point of contact between the oppressed and the oppressor. Many women in the society do have choices. Therefore exploitation, discrimination are words that more accurately describe the lot of women collectively in the United States. Many women do not join organized resistance against sexism because sexism has not meant an absolute lack of choices. They may know they are discriminated on the basis of sex but they do not equate this with oppression. Under
capitalism, patriarchy is structured so that sexism restrict women’s behaviour in some realms even as freedom from limitations is allowed in other spheres. The absence of extreme restriction leads many women to ignore the areas in which they are exploited or discriminated against; it may even lead them to imagine that no women are oppressed.

Black women’s literature has a unique set of characteristics and emphases which distinguish it from other work. Black feminist writing provides an incisive critical perspective on sexual political issues that affect black women. With black women refusing to be silenced they raised their voices in some of the fieriest writing of the era. The decade of the 70s represented another renaissance in black women’s writing. The issues that were addressed included gender, sexism, black womanhood and black female identity, mother daughter relationships, sisterhood, sexual orientation, black heterosexism, domestic violence, family, community and culture. The writers insisted that a fully integrated self is grounded in cultural, communal and ancestral truths. Poets such as Mikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, Sonia Sanchez and novelists like Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Jamaica Kincaid and Glorai Naylor created a body of literature that has been canonized and academically accepted. They have enabled, in the words of Alice Walker “Black women
especially those most marginalized by race, caste and class, to have their voices heard and their histories read”. Barbara Smith in her essay “Towards a Black Feminist Criticism” said, “Feminism is the political theory that struggles to free all women: women of colour, working class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women, as well as white, economically, privileged, heterosexual women.”(Awkward 2000:94)

African American women writers have always tried to assert the unique nature of their experiences, which they felt were distinct from the white woman’s situation since they had to battle on more fronts- white patriarchy, against white women’s racism and sexism of Black men. They have always militated against the tendency of white feminists to take their own situations as the paradigm of women’s position. Walker’s major themes of her fiction and poetry is about vulnerability, having a mind of one’s own, the price of childbirth, friendships among women, the problems of loving men who regard women as less than themselves, sensuality and violence. She comes at universality though the black American woman’s experiences and is brave enough to write about such delicate fictional themes as interracial sex and oppression of women by many cultures in Africa.
However, feminist emphasis common oppression in the United States was less a strategy for politicization than appropriation by conservative and liberal women of a radical political vocabulary that masked the extent to which they shaped the movement so that it addressed and promoted their class interest. Initially, radical participant in women’s movement demanded that women penetrate that isolation and create a space for contact. Anthologies like *Liberation Now, Women’s Liberation: Blue print for the future, Class and Feminism, Radical Feminism, and Sisterhood is powerful* all published in the early 1970s contained articles that attempted a wide audience of women, an audience that was not exclusively white, middle class, college educated and adult. Sookie Stambler articulated this radical spirit in her introduction to *Women’s Liberation: Blue print for the future:*

> Movement women have always been turned off by the media’s necessity to create celebrities and superstars. This goes against our basic philosophy. We cannot relate to women in our ranks with prestige and fame. We are not struggling for the benefit of the one woman or for a group of women. We are dealing with issues that concern all women. (qtd in hooks 136)
These sentiments shared by many feminists early in the movement were not sustained. As more and more women acquired prestige or money from feminist writings or from gains from feminist movement for equality in the work force, individual opportunism undermined appeals for collective struggle. Women who were not opposed to patriarchy, capitalism, classicism or racism labeled themselves “feminists”. Their expectations were varied. Privileged women wanted social equality with men of their class, some women wanted equal pay for equal work, and others wanted an alternative lifestyle. Many of these legitimate concerns were easily co-opted by the ruling capitalists, patriarchy. French feminist Antoinette Fouque states that the actions opposed by the feminist groups are spectacular and provoking. But provocation only brings to light a certain number of social contradictions. It does not reveal radical contradictions within society. The feminist claim that they do not seek equality with men, but their practice proves the contrary to be true. Feminists are a bourgeois avantgarde that maintain an inverted form, the dominant values. Inversion does not facilitate the passage to another kind of structure. Reformism suits everyone. Bourgeois order capitalism fellow centrism is ready to integrate as many feminists as will be necessary. Since these women are becoming men, in the end it will be only men a few more men.
Feminists in the United States are aware of the contradictions. Carol Ehrlich makes the point in her essay, “The Unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism: Can it be saved?” (Hooks 137) that feminism seems more and more to have taken on a blind, safe non-revolutionary outlook. As feminist radicalism loses ground to bourgeoise feminism, stressing that “we cannot let this continue” (ibidem), the ideology of competitive atomistic liberal individualism has permeated feminist thought to such an extent that it undermines the potential radicalism of feminist struggle. The usurpation of feminism by bourgeoise to support their class interest has been to a very great extent justified by feminist theory as it has so far been conceived. Any movement to resist the cooptation of feminist struggle must begin by introducing a different feminist perspective- a new theory one that is not informed by the idea of liberal individualism.

The exclusionary practices of women who dominate feminist discourse have made it practically impossible for new and varied theories to emerge. Feminism has its party line and women who feel the need for a different strategy, a different foundation often find themselves ostracized and silenced. Criticism of alternatives to establish feminist ideas are not encouraged. Yet groups of women who feel excluded from feminist discourse and praxis can make a place for themselves only if they try to
create via critics, an awareness of the factors that alienate them. Many
individual white women found the women’s movement a liberatory solution
to personal dilemmas. Having directly benefited from the movement, they
are less inclined to criticize it or to engage in rigorous examination of its
structure than those who feel it has to have a revolutionary impact on their
lives or on the lives of masses of women in the society. Non-white women
who feel affirmed within the current structure of feminist movement seem to
also feel that their definitions of the party line, whether on the issue of black
feminism or on other issues is the only legitimate discourse. Rather than
encouraging diversity of voices, critical dialogue and controversy, they like
some white women seem to stifle dissent. As activists and writers whose
work is widely known they act as if they are best able to judge whether
other women’s voices should be heard.

Frequently, white feminists act as if black women did not have sexist
oppression existed until they voiced feminist sentiment. They believe they
are providing black women with the analysis and the program for liberation.
They do not understand and cannot even imagine that black women as well
as other groups of women who live daily in oppressive situations often
acquire an awareness of patriarchal politics from their lived experience just
as they developed strategies of resistance. These black women observed
white feminist focus on male tyranny and women’s oppression as if it were a new revelation and felt such a focus had little impact on their lives. To them it was just another indication of the privileged living conditions of middle and upper class white women that they would need a theory to inform them that they were oppressed. The implication being that people, who are truly oppressed, know it even though they would want to be engaged in organized resistance or are unable to articulate in written form the nature of their oppression. These black women saw nothing liberatory in party line analysis in women’s oppression. Neither the fact that black women have not organized collectively in huge numbers around the issues of feminism nor the fact that they have not had access to the machinery of power that would allow them to share their analysis or theories about gender with the American public, negate its presence in their lives or place them in the position of dependency in relationship to those white and non-white feminists who address a larger audience.

The condescension they directed at black women was one of the means they employed to remind them that women’s movement belonged to the white. That they were able to participate because white allowed them or even encouraged it. They did not see black women as equals or treat them as equals. Though they expected black women to provide first hand
accounts of black experience they felt it was their role to decide if these experiences were authentic. Frequently college educated black women were dismissed as mere imitators. Their presence in movement activities did not count as white women were convinced that real blackness meant speaking the patois of poor black people, being uneducated, streetwise and a variety of other stereotypes. If we dared to criticize the movement to assume responsibility for reshaping feminist ideas and introducing new ideas their voices were turned out, dismissed, silenced. They could be heard only if their statements echoed the sentiments of the dominant discourse.

Attempts by white feminists to silence black women are rarely written about. All too often they have taken place in conference rooms, classrooms or the privacy of cosy living room settings where one lone black woman faces the racist hostility of a group of white women. From the time the women’s liberation movement began, individual women went to groups. Many never returned after a first meeting. Recent focus on the issue of racism has generated discourse but has had little impact on the behaviour of white feminists towards black women. Often the white women who are busy publishing papers and books on “unlearning racism” remain patronizing and condescending when they relate to black women. This is
not surprising given that frequently their discourse is aimed solely in the
direction of white audience and the focus solely on changing attitudes
rather than addressing racism in historical and political context. They make
black women the “object” of their privileged discourse of race. Racist
stereotypes of the strong superhuman black woman are operative myths in
the minds of many white women, allowing them to ignore the extent to
which black women are likely to be victimized in the society and the role
white women may play in the maintenance and perpetuation of their
victimization.

Privileged feminists have been unable to speak to, with and for
diverse groups of women because they either do not understand fully the
interrelatedness of sex, race and class oppression and refuse to take this
interrelatedness seriously. Feminist analysis of women’s lot tends to focus
exclusively on gender and do not provide a solid foundation on which to
construct feminist theory. They reflect the dominant tendency in western
patriarchal minds to mystify women’s reality by insisting that gender is the
sole determinant of women’s fate. Certainly it has been easier for women
who do not experience race or class oppression to focus exclusively on
gender. Although socialist feminist focus is on class and gender, they tend
to dismiss race or they make a point of acknowledging that race is
important and then proceed to offer an analysis in which race is not considered.

As a group, black women are in an unusual position in American society for not only are they collectively in the bottom of the occupational ladder but the overall social status is lower than that of any group. They bear the brunt of sexist, racist, and classist oppression. At the same time they are the group which has not been socialized to assume the role of exploiter/oppressor and that we are allowed not institutionalized other that they can exploit or oppress. White women and black men have it both ways. They act as oppressor or be oppressed. Black men may be oppressed by racism but sexism allows them to act as oppressors and exploiters of women. White women may be victimized by sexism but racism enables them to act as exploiters and oppressors of black people. Both groups have led liberation movements that favour their interest and support the continued oppression of other groups. Black male sexism has undermined struggles to eradicate racism just as white female racism undermines feminist struggle. As long as these two groups or any group defines liberation as gaining social equality with ruling class white men, they have a vested interest in the continued exploitation and oppression of others. Black women with no institutionalized “others” that they can
discriminate against, exploit or oppress often, have a lived experience that
directly challenges the prevailing classist, sexist, racist, social structure and
its concomitant ideology. This lived experience may shape our
consciousness in such a way that our world view differs from those who
have a degree of privilege. It is essential for continued feminist struggle that
black women recognize the special vantage point their marginality gives
them and make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist,
classist and sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter
hegemony. Black women have a central role to play in the making of
feminist theory and a contribution to offer that is unique and valuable. The
formation of a liberatory feminist theory and praxis is a collective
responsibility that needs to be shared.

The subsequent chapters present the analysis and comparison of
Alice Walker and select Naga women writers like Kekhrievoü Yhome,
Easterine Iralu, Temsula Ao, Monalisa Changkija, Nini Lungalang and
others in the light of various feminist or womanist ideologies.
References


*Wikipedia* downloaded on 12/06/2013.

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