INTRODUCTION

Holstein and Gubrium remark in The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World:

In this environment, does the self lose its direction along with its grand narrative? Can we continue to consider it in terms of choice, of right and wrong, of responsibility and decision-making? A beacon of experience, observes, reconnoiters, weighs alternatives, and prudently directs itself along the way. In a postmodern world, the self’s story forges ahead, but also follows in its own wake. Both before and after we set out on the proverbial path of life the self is informed by diverse courses (215)

In the present age of multipositionality, the grand narrative of self devolves into multiple stories, pared down, circumscribed and dispersed to myriad locations of everyday life. The term acquires even greater intricacy when viewed from the vantage point of women. This project is predicated on that relationship. It looks at contemporary Indian women’s narratives in the context of the social and cultural order out of which they evolve. In fact interest in women writing, feminism, their search for identity and selfhood are all the more telling in the context of debates over multiculturalism, which are also struggling with juxtaposing ideas of a common humanity that takes into account diversity and difference.

Sondra Fargains remarks in the introduction to her book Situating Feminism:

The feminist concern with difference may be adopted because it reflects a sensitivity towards the variety of cultural experiences in which women find themselves; but differences can also be seen as either exotica or the inequities that are found in pluralistic societies that have multiple and distinct publics, or as a reflection of the
overlapping identities and the eclectic aspect of all postmodern societies. (2)

But even before one can rise above the differences, one needs to look into the first principles of the feminist movement, its assumptions and its wide ranging manifestations.

The term feminism has been defined, analyzed, reviewed, criticized, redefined, de-constructed, revisited and pulled and stretched from so many directions for so long that sometimes it seems almost difficult to begin talking about it. However that is not to say that the same should be abandoned. In fact, given the rapidly changing geo-political scenario in this era of globalization, feminism now functions as a foundational basis for many activists, policy makers and academicians than as an epistemological framework only at the theoretical level. But hardly any mainstream development planning is possible without considering the gender variable.

Thus even before one undertakes to address plurality within feminism, a brief word about gender and its implications on feminist theory is, imperative. David Glower and Cora Kaplan write about gender in *Genders*:

> Gender is a much contested concept, as slippery as it is indispensable, but a site of unease rather than argument. If gender is used to mark differences between men and women, portmanteau words like gender-bending and gender-blending call those differences into question, drawing to the artificiality of what we think of as natural behavior. (ix)

Not just Glower and Caplan but many theorists have made a distinction between gender and sex. Alex Comfort writes in *Sexual Behavior in Society*:

> The gender role which an individual adopts- manly or womanly – according to the standards of his culture, is oddly enough almost
wholly learned, and little if at all built in, in fact the gender role learned by the age of two years is for most individuals almost irreversible, even if it runs counter to the physical sex of the subject. (42)

However, this distinction is not being suggested to enable a rethinking of the boundaries of gender(s) but only to suggest that like gender even women’s identity is a social and cultural construct. However, returning to feminism, unlike Marxism, liberalism or any other ‘ism’, feminism has been the most intensely debated of all these branches. As can be the case with any engaging and pervading issue, feminism has been approached from different perspectives and contrasting viewpoints by its own proponents. In its early days, feminism was primarily focused on the inclusion of women. The necessity of assessing the opportunity cost of household works done by women, the social value of childbearing and motherhood, the economic value of generating human capital became unavoidable. Impact of women on various national and international policies like discriminatory civil and judicial laws, privatization etc. along with existing patriarchal social and cultural norms that reinforced the very process of discrimination were formally acknowledged and documented.

Feminism, however has always been beset by a central paradox in its assumptions i.e. the need to build the identity “woman” and give it solid political meaning and the need to tear down the very category “woman” and to dismantle its all-too-solid history. The contrasting mood of the movement has been beautifully expressed by Ann Snitow in her now classic essay “A Gender Diary”. She says:

In the early days of the wave of this woman’s movement, I sat in a weekly consciousness raising group with my friend A. we compared notes recently: what did you think was happening? How did you think our lives were going to change? A. said she had felt, “Now I can be a woman; its no longer so humiliating. I can stop
fantasizing that secretly I am a man, as I used to, before I had children. Now I can value what was once my shame.’ Her answer amazed me. Sitting in the same meetings during those years, my thoughts were roughly the reverse: ‘Now I don’t have to be a woman anymore. I need never become a mother. Being a woman has always been humiliating, but I used to assume that there was no exit. Now the very idea “woman” is up for grabs. “Woman” is my slave name; feminism will give me freedom to seek some other identity altogether. (9)

While that paradox still haunts feminism, yet the movement has progressed and proliferated in various nooks and crannies across the globe. In the recent times, especially with the rise of postmodernism, universalist claims about women have come to be questioned. There has been an attempt now to situate or locate feminism in a specific social, economic, historical, political and cultural context for analysis, especially when discussing the non-western/third world women.

But before one addresses the dynamics of third world feminism, I will try and look briefly into plurality into the emergence of feminisms in the western context. New French Feminisms (1980) was a path breaking anthology that did more than introduce American academic feminists to the debates in France and to the richly speculative possibilities of poststructuralist theory for feminism. Appropriately pluralizing the singular term feminism, it reflected the vitally important attempt pioneered especially by women of color, lesbian women and Jewish feminists to base an understanding of the gender system upon the recognition of differences among women.

Plurality within feminism can be understood both in terms of the intellectual and political traditions that inform a particular school of thought as also the geographical location that lends its own coloration to it. For instance one can make a binarist division on the basis of intellectual traditions that shapes feminism and accordingly classify it into materialist and psychoanalytical
theoretical traditions represented by Simone de Beauvoir and Monique Wittig on one hand and Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva on the other hand. Haunting each were the masterful shadows of Marx and Freud, Sartre, Lacan and Derrida - intellectuals whose oppositions have long been set into dialogic interplay in western philosophical and political traditions.

Similarly feminism acquires a local coloration and signification when transplanted from one social or cultural set up to the other. That is to say, as an example, in United States feminism acquires its own meaning, influenced by the way in which Civil Rights movement of the 1950-70s along with the general social / political ferment of the 1960’s had contributed to the reawakening of feminism and to the formation of Gay and Lesbian Rights movement in the late 1960s and 1970s. A more detailed appreciation of the same is offered by Sondra Fargains in Situating Feminism. She says:

Altered economic arrangements, new patterns of capital accumulation, revision in standard industrial policies and the growth of hi-tech industries suggest that America stands at a key moment of social change. The reordering of power in world state systems, the challenge to democracy at home and abroad, the crises in health care, and the technological rewriting of birth, life and death practices are just a few instances of new scripts that present the American polity with new problems. (15)

Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique, is a significant work of feminist thought in the American context that explains events in progress. An important question that emerges is here is whether feminism in one theory or a set of theories. Still more one wonders if it is the case that there are sufficient unifying principles built around the idea that women are subjugated by men that allow us to consider it as a broadly conceived theory. Perhaps that is the case and Gender is the key variable. Not to say that feminist theory is unaware of the other
aspects of people’s lives; rather it is the centrality of gender over that other aspect that is at its core.

Audre Lorde has expressed the same idea in “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” in *Sister Outsider*. She remarks:

By and large within the women’s movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class and age. There is a pretense to homogeneity of experience covered by the sisterhood that in fact does not exist. (122)

The all important focus on recognizing the differences among men and women had worked to obscure the intricate and specific nature of differences among women based on different kinds of oppressions. Lorde’s call for direct acknowledgement of differences among women based on multiple oppressions highlighted a process of pluralisation into feminism that had already begun in theory and practice with the formation of organizations like Black Feminism and various anthologies by women in different parts of the globe. In this context abandonment of the singular term feminism and the adoption of plural “feminisms” signified theoretical and coalitional praxis that refused any affirmations of a universal sisterhood of women joined together against worldwide patriarchy in the name of woman.

The spatial rhetoric of multipositionality has come to define feminism in a significant way for it provides a way to deal with differences among women based on factors such as race, class, sexuality, religion and class identity. Black Feminists of the 1970s such as Frances Beal, Alice Walker, Barbara Smith, June Jordan and Audre Lorde were among the early pioneers to which many other added in 1980s and 1990s. It includes names like Gloria Anzaldúa, Adrienne Rich, Paula Gunn Allen, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Biddy Martin, Gayatri Spivak, Teresa de Lauretis, Donna Harraway, Nancy Harstock, Amy Ling and
Linda Alcoff etc. As a result of this, it is now the norm within feminism to speak of the position one occupies, to refer to the standpoint from which one speaks and to allude to the location within which one's agency negotiates.

Third world societies, it has to be remembered too, are many and varied. What connects them is perhaps that all of them are mostly post-colonial, developing countries and they are situated at a juncture where the legacies of old traditions and influences of the eastern ways of life create a fusion that continually shapes the structure of these societies. However each third world society is distinct and is shaped by its cultural tradition, religion, social norms as well as the position of the particular nation-state within the world system.

However any discussion about the third world women is not uncomplicated for the notion of their difference or alterity has been often seen as a weapon that furthers their marginal status. Creating space for a separate identity has ironically reinforced the racial stereotypes. Not only that there is a demand that it is the task of the black and the third world women to educate white women, in the face of tremendous resistance, as to their existence, their differences, their relative roles. This amounts to a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought. Trinh T. Minh-Ha recounts her own experience about the same in Women, Native, Other: Writing, Postcoloniality and Feminism saying:

Now, I am not only given the permission to open up and talk, I am also encouraged to express my difference. My audience expects and demands it; otherwise people would feel they have been cheated. We did not come to hear a third world member speak about the First (?) World, we came to listen to that voice of difference likely to bring us what we can’t have and divert us from the monotony of sameness. (56)

Very often third world women have been presented as the oppressed without any attempt to further analyze the extent and the form of the process of
Positing women as an analytical category is problematic, for women as a group/social category one realizes, is not a homogenous category. Terms like ‘women’s problems’ often hide the fact that women from different classes, cultures, races and religions face very different challenges and experience conflicting outcomes of the same social phenomenon.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has spoken about the plurality within this category. She makes a remark about in the same in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (qtd. in Post Colonial Studies Reader). She refers to the nineteenth century British records of Hindu widows who sacrificed their lives after their husband’s death. She remarks:

As one goes down the grotesquely mistranscribed names of these women, the sacrificed widows, in the police reports included in the records of the East India Company, one cannot put together a voice. The most one can sense is the immense heterogeneity breaking through even such a skeletal and ignorant account. (33)

While Spivak speaks of the doubly oppressed native woman who cannot be heard or read, Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues in her critique of western feminist writings on ‘Third World Women’, discourses of representation should not be confused with material realities. Since the native woman is constructed within multiple social relationships and positioned as the product of different class, caste and cultural specificities, it should be possible to locate traces and testimony of women’s voice on those sites where women described themselves as healers, ascetics, singers of sacred songs, artisans and artists, and thus modifies Spivak’s model of the silent subaltern. In Spivak’s writings however, the space in which the colonialist women can be written back into history, even when the ‘interventionist possibilities’ are exploited through the deconstructive strategies devised by the post colonial intellectual is very restricted.
Benita Parry remarks about the theoretical position of Spivak in *The Post Colonial Studies Reader*, saying, “Spivak’s deliberated deafness to the native voice where it is to be heard, is at variance with her acute hearing of the unsaid in the modes of western feminist criticism.”(47).

However any attempt to see third world feminism simply in terms of a combat with western feminism is indeed reductionist. Sara Suleri looks at another aspect of third world women by pointing out the impediments within the margins of a postcolonial feminist discourse. Troubled by the imbrications of race and gender in postcolonial feminist discourse that are accorded an iconicity that’s too good to be true, she wonders how feminist discourse can represent categories of ‘woman’ and ‘race’ at the same time. As she searches for a novel idiom that may communicate their radical inseparability, she fears in “Women Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition”, *Critical Inquiry*:

The lines of demarcation between race and gender conclude by falling into a predictable biological fallacy in which sexuality is reduced to the literal structure of the racial body and theoretical interventions within this trajectory become minimalised into the naked category of lived experience. (18,4)

Thus different issues, strategies and theoretical impediments emerge within the canon of third world feminism. Where Sara Suleri is primarily concerned about the signification of gendered race and how it returns to the realism that it most seeks to disavow, there are other more radical feminists who provide an alternate perspective.

bell hook’s *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, a vehement critique of colonization is narcissistic in its projection of what a black and thinking female body may appear to be, particularly in the context of its repudiation of the genre of realism. Her study is predicated on the anecdotes of lived experience and their capacity to provide an alternative to the discourse of
what she terms patriarchal rationalism. She claims to speak beyond binarism. She remarks, “dare I speak to oppressed and oppressor in the same language? Dare I speak to you in a language that will not fence you in, bind you or hold you? Language is also a place for struggle.” (28)

While tales of lived experience alone cannot serve as a sufficient alternative, as in the case of bell hooks, there are many other constructions of identity of the third world women that suggest other kinds of realisms as also reiterate the problems endemic to third world feminism.

However Trinh T Minh-ha goes a step further in this debate about narrative territories of power and domination concerning third world women in No Master Territories saying:

The center itself is marginal....how possible it is to undertake a process of decentralization without being made aware of the margins within the center and the centers within the margin? Without encountering marginalization from both the ruling center and the established margin? Wherever she goes she is asked to show her identity papers. What side does she speak up for? Where does she belong (politically, economically)? (47)

Asserting that marginality indeed is the condition of the center she says about their writing in When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics:

The moment the insider steps out from the inside, she is no longer a mere insider. Like the outsider, she steps back and records what never occurs to her the insider. But unlike the outsider she also resorts to non-explicative, non-totalizing strategies that suspend meaning and resist closure. (25)
However what comes closest to the vision of this project which seeks to understand the relationship of feminism with narratology is Homi K. Bhabha who produces in his works, for scrutiny a discursive situation making for recurrent instances of transgression performed by the native from within and against colonial narratives. While most others fear the auto colonization of the native by meeting the requirements of the colonialist narrative, he sees the same as coextensive with the evasions and sly civility through which the female native refuses to satisfy the demand of the colonizer’s narrative. He remarks, “for the very nature of humanity becomes estranged in the colonial condition and from that ‘naked declivity’ it emerges, not as an assertion of will nor as an evocation of freedom, but as an enigmatic questioning.” (60)

An important concern here thus is to investigate the relationship between feminism and narratology. While feminism tends to be seen as impressionistic, evaluative and political, narratology tends to be perceived as scientific, descriptive and non-ideological. In fact no contemporary theory has exerted so little influence on the feminist theory as narratology. The reasons for this distrust of narratology on the part of feminism are many and varied.

Narratology has a vocabulary that is complex and therefore alienating. Not only that, the binaristic thinking to which structuralist narratology is prone is further unsettling for majority of the feminists. The fact that no work in the field of narratology had taken gender into account and that they have based their theories primarily on the study of men’s texts are other reasons for a remote convergence between the two. Moreover structuralist narratology has suppressed the representational aspects of fiction and stressed the semiotic (this tendency related to a predisposition that seeks to isolate texts from the context of their production and reception.) while feminist criticism is predicated upon the view that narrative texts are profoundly referential in their representations of gender relations.
The goal here is to see whether feminist criticism and particularly the study of narrative by women can derive anything from the methods and insights of narratology and, in turn, narratology might undergo any change by the understandings of feminist criticism. An interesting study in the area has been done by Susan Lanser in her work Towards a Feminist Narratology proposes that feminist narratology will begin with the recognition that revision of a theory’s premises and practices is legitimate and desirable.

Eventually she goes on to identify those elements of narrative that she thinks will be affected by a consideration of gender. A feminist narratology, she states would synthesize the semiotic with the mimetic and seek to study narrative in the referential context that is simultaneously linguistic, literary, historiographical, social and political.

She identifies three areas in which narratology revised from a feminist perspective might make useful contributions. The first she identifies is Voice. Gerard Gennette has pointed out that narratives have several layers, each giving rise to a different voice. That is to say, Lanser identifies a surface level, a sub-text and even a third narrative level. She writes in Towards a Feminist Narratology:

The (surface) text designed for the husband conceals an under text (the text designed for the female confidante) but the under text, in turn, creates a new reading of the surface text and hence a third text designed… for yet another addressee…its addressee is the literary reader; she is neither the duped male nor the sister confidante but the unidentified public narratee of either sex who can see beyond the immediate context of the writer’s circumstance to read the negative discourse as covert cultural analysis. (619)

Arguing that this notion of levels provides a precise way of speaking about such embedded narratives, Lanser also goes on to suggest that it is possible to
think of these three narrative levels as *extradiegetic*, *intradiegetic* and *metadiegetic*. Extradiegetic narrators are most often synonymous with author narrators, intradiegetic and metadiegetic narrators with characters who tell stories within the text and address the narratee. This scheme given by Gennette, according to Lanser should be complemented by her distinction between public and private narration.

Where public narration means narration addressed to a narratee who is external to the textual world and who can be equated with a public readership, private narration on the other hand, means narration addressed to an explicitly designated narratee who exists only within the textual world. The distinction is important for the study of women’s writing, because traditionally women were not barred from writing per se but from writing for a public audience. By supplementing structuralist narratology with such additions, Lanser hopes to stress the difference between the purely formal and contextual approaches to meaning in narrative.

With regard to the question of plot, Lanser argues that women’s narratives have always been labeled as plotless i.e. predominantly static when compared to men’s narratives. Traditionally, plots are seen as structured in terms of units of anticipation and fulfillment or problem and solution. The definition assumes that textual actions are based on the deeds of the protagonists. They assume a power, a possibility, that may be inconsistent with what women have experienced both historically and textually and perhaps even incompatible with women’s desires. Such male oriented schemas define plot as a “discourse of male desire recounting itself through the narrative of adventure, project, enterprise and conquest”(623)

As a result conventional and masculinist definitions of plot are not applicable to either women’s experiences or writing as a result of which a radical revision in the theories of plot is necessary.

Lanser argues, however, that there is another level to narratives written by all persons but which may be particularly relevant to women’s experience.
The act of writing becomes the fulfillment of desire, telling becomes the single predicated act, as if to tell were to resolve, to provide closure. *Recit* and *historie*, rather than being separate elements, converge, so that telling becomes integral to the working out of story.

Communication, understanding, being understood, becomes not only the objective of the narration but the act that can transform the narrated world. Since the narrative itself becomes only a source of possibility, Lanser sees another plot behind the plotless narrative by women, the additional plot of sharing an experience so that the listener's life may complete the writer's tale.

However at the same time it may be realized that this kind of correspondence between feminism and narratology being suggested is also the work of a western theorist and thus, one cannot see how this structural explanation can be extended to describe the narratives of third world women. Accepting the same for women in other cultures may amount to a surrender to the predatory effects of global hegemonies, as Bhabha says in *The Location of Culture* “however ameliorative or philanthropic the original attention might have been.”( xv)

In fact not just Lanser, even Kathy Mezei in *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and Women Writers* focuses on the study of narrative structures and strategies in the context of cultural constructions of gender. The underlying assumption that runs through most of the essays being that dominant ideology and narrative structure of western literature has been and continues to be patriarchal, but that, if we, analyze certain texts with a conscious sensitivity to feminist concerns, we can discern a narrative strategy subversive of this dominant patriarchy.

In fact theorists who work with narratives by women have also discovered how women’s texts and the cultural products associated with women are often ignored or devalued by contemporaries and scholars. For instance, Melba Cuddy
Keane's "The Rhetoric of Feminist Conversation" examines the social function of gossip. Although, gossip is many respects, quintessentially feminine, and hence private, mode of discourse, it is nonetheless circulated in a public manner and plays a crucial role in shaping male and female subjectivities. She analyses the feminine discourse of conversation as opposed to the masculine tract. She further points out that conversation is the exchange of different views and therefore construed as a light discourse but in the hands of a feminist author, the expression of a conscientious political action.

However more rewarding work in the area comes in the form of those essays that discuss the interplay of capitalism, empire and patriarchy to create a richer and a more rewarding context for explication of feminist narrative strategies. In other words it is the narratives of culture and identity that provide an adequate reference point for the construction of women's identity in different social set ups. Since the project intends, more than anything else to understand women's selfhood and identity in the backdrop of an articulatory framework that is culturally rooted, it is important that the question of identity is addressed here.

Peter Berger writes in *Invitation to Psychology* about identity:

> Every society contains a repertoire of identities that is part of the “objective knowledge” of its members. It is “known” as a matter” of course” that there are men and women, that they have such and such psychological traits and that they will have such and such psychological reactions in typical circumstances. As the individual is socialized, these identities are internalized. They are then…taken for granted…socialization brings about symmetry between objective and subjective reality, objective and subjective identity. (107)

However, identity in the modern world has been released from the moorings that anchored it in the past. The family, the religious body, the
community, the nation itself no longer has a hold over our lives as they previously had. Psychologist Kenneth Gergen is deeply troubled by the condition of the self in a postmodern world. In his book *The Saturated Self*, he provides a view of the contemporary life that shakes one’s confidence in experience, but not to the extent that he radically denies the continuing significance of the self. Though he affirms self’s reality but worries over the way postmodernism and globalization make it increasingly difficult to sustain a sense of unity and constancy in our lives. He expresses his fear saying, “Like the concepts of truth, objectivity and knowledge, the very idea of individual selves- in possession of mental qualities- is now threatened with eradication.” (10)

Similarly Norman Denzin in his book *Images of Postmodern Society* also expresses concern about the same as he traces the symbolic interactionist roots that inform the self that draws from diverse sources for identity he talks of an idea of self that is shaped by experiences of gender, race, nationality, family and many other such factors. He particularly seems interested in investigating the increasingly pervasive mediating images of literary and cinematic narratives.

However he seems extremely skeptical of narratives that gloss over the many determinants of identity and instead produce one-dimensional identities. He remarks about the off-handedness of such narratives, “Reality as it is known is mediated by symbolic representation by narrative texts and by cinematic structures that stand between the person and the so-called real world.” (26)

But speak as one must, particularly about the narratives about Indian women’s identity, stung by the British condemnation of practices such as purdah, sati and child marriage and prohibition of widow remarriage, women writers responded diversely. Some justified these customs in the light of Indian traditions, some claimed that in an earlier purer age women had enjoyed a much higher status, some called up for reforms, some held up to ridicule the behavior of western women. Such formulation of identity was typical of the colonial period. With the passage of years, women writers in India not only enlarged the sphere of
writing their identity but also started relating ideas about women and gender relations to the social and economic forces that shape history.

Speaking about Indian issues strictly from the Indian standpoint, after the publication of the report by the National Committee on the Status of Women, economic issues came to the forefront. This helped to shift the focus from a concentration on the narrow stratum of middle class women to the bulk of the female population in the villages and towns. Eventually movement in India took into fold issues of dowry, rape, prostitution, domestic violence, birth control, health. Thus culture and ideology came gradually to be added to the list.

The role of culture and ideology in determining the identity of women did not receive attention for a long time. However with the rise and spread of cultural feminism across the globe, these factors were seen as significant instruments for shaping the contours of subordination as well as their conceptualization of liberation. An important aspect to be noted here is that while overcoming material obstacles is indeed of prime importance but the neglect of the transformation of cultural values can actually subvert the liberatory potential in these endeavors. That is to say, given the cultural milieu specific to India, education for women instead of promoting greater autonomy may become an additional attribute of marriageability or independent earnings merely add up as additional responsibility undertaken for the family. Similarly patriarchy may be the dominant mode of social organization but over the years, the plurality that is hidden underneath it has given rise to the notion of patriarchies. Jasbir Jain’s Women in Patriarchy looks at the new material from different regions of India that gives evidence of this plurality.

Speaking as one is about the cultural paradigm within which the Indian women are located, the project does so by trying to engage with the question of women’s home and their search for identity. The project tries to explore the meaning of house and home, linking it to the concept of the narrative. It looks at three texts by Indian women writers where in all three have used domestic space
as an archival source from which to construct their own identities. The elusiveness of an enduring and stable home in the experiences of each of these women contributed to the writing of these narratives. The third text written by an expatriate writer contributes to the power of the idea of home as imagination. As a result, home as both a dwelling and a nation, a physical place and an artifact of memory, unifies the project.

Questions like ‘who am I’ and ‘where do I belong to’ become inevitable in such a case. Identity is in a sense what this discussion is all about. Identity which, ideally talks about the relationship of the individual to the society, deserves special attention in the context of the cultural crisis and revival of ethnicity. Philip Gleason speaks about the increased relevance of this concept in “Identifying Identity” in The Journal of American History:

Identity promised to elucidate a new kind of conceptual linkage between the two elements of the problem, since it was used in reference to, and dealt with the relationship of, the individual personality and the ensemble of social and cultural features that gave different groups their distinctive character.... There is in the nature of the case a close connection between the notion of identity and the awareness of belonging to a distinctive group set apart from others by race, religion, national background or some other cultural marker.(69,4)

However even as one talks about women’s identity as reflected from their narratives, the retrieval of roots is often beset with problems. These women, when they write are expected to offer a possibility of otherness or difference. Trinh. T. Minh-ha verbalizes the same concern in The Post Colonial Studies Reader in these words. She says:

Authenticity in such cases turns out to be a product that one can buy, arrange to one’s liking and / or preserve. Today, the
‘unspoiled’ parts of Japan, the far flung locations in the archipelago, are those that tourism officials promote for the more venturesome visitors. Similarly, from the third world representative, the modern sophisticated public ideally seeks the unspoiled Africa, Asian, or Native American, who remains more preoccupied with her/his image of the real native— the truly different— than with the issues of hegemony, racism, feminism and social change. (248)

Current feminist discourse remains vexed by questions of identity formation and selfhood as also by the concomitant debates between essentialism and constructivism, or distinction between situated and universal knowledge. Here the binarism that informs Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s essay, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” deserves attention. She engages in a particular critique of the third world women as a monolithic category in the texts of Western feminism. She questions as to what happens when an assumption of the women as an oppressed group is situated in the context of western feminist writing about third world women. In contesting what she claims is a colonialist move; she proceeds to say that the western feminists alone become the true subjects of this counter history.

Narratives of culture and identity about women are many and varied. In one way or the other, all of them showcase imperialism and the imperial tongue as the culprit. Braj B. Kachru refers to the code-mixing in the language in The Alchemy of English that results in the neutralization of identities. He says:

It has been shown that in code-mixing, for example, English is being used to neutralize identities one is reluctant to express by the use of native language or dialects... neutralization thus is a linguistic strategy used to unload a linguistic item from its traditional, cultural and emotional connotations by avoiding its use and choosing an item from another code. The borrowed item has a
referential meaning, but no cultural connotations in the context of the specific culture. (276)

But aware as these women are of the cultural obliterations likely to be inflicted by a nonchalant use of this language, they clarify that while they use this language, yet it does not imply an attempt to conceal their own cultural identity. In fact, if closely considered the intent is quite the contrary. Chinua Achebe remarks in “Politics and Politicians of Language in African Literature”. She says, “I write in English. English is a world language. But I do not write in English because it is a world language. My romance with the world is subsidiary to my involvement with Nigeria.” (268)

The women keen on inscribing their historically and culturally rooted identity in writing are beset also by the challenges of globalization. The same is responsible for the transformation of social and economic relationships as also the national boundaries across the globe. But having said that, one sees in the writings of these third world women, in particular, an incommensurability between popular narrative pragmatics and their rendition of the same. Jean-Francois Lyotard in his book The Postmodern Condition identified four narrative functions and did not assume that there should be a congruence between such criteria and social regulation. That in turn creates so much flexibility in the model proposed by him that it indeed opens up spaces for the counter-hegemonic moves of third world women writers.

The first of these criteria’s that he identifies is that narratives recount what could be positive or negative apprenticeship. Accordingly the success or failure of the hero either bestow legitimacy upon social institutions or offer a critique of the same. He then goes on to talk of variety of language games used to develop narrative knowledge. He mentions use of denotative statements, interrogatives, evaluative statements and some others suggesting how the predominance of any one kind lends a particular flavor to this discourse.
He also identifies the transmission of narratives as a crucial determinant of discourse. Through clever argument he unsettles the essentialist narrator-narratee relationship. Not only has that he examined carefully the effect of narrative on time. Narrative form follows a rhythm; it is the synthesis of a meter beating time in regular periods. But as already suggested, he is immensely aware of the all pervasive power of culture within which the narrative shapes itself and therefore does not calcify his categories as rigid and unchanging.

Talking as one is about subversions that third world women create within the narrative space, it may be observed that unlike the western tradition where so much has been made of the ‘Woman as Image, Man as the Bearer of the Look’ Idea, within the narratives taken up in this project this kind of sexual imbalance will be adroitly redressed by these women. Thus the fear of the determining male gaze that the likes of Laura Mulvey have taken up in Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema will be replaced by narrative discourses that will not only restore the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative but also, on the contrary present male characters as flat and cut-out.

Trinh T. Minh-Ha provides her own interpretation of women’s narratives. She says in Grandma’s Story in Women, Native, Other: Writing, Postcoloniality and Feminism:

I owe that to you, her and her, who owe it to her, her and her. I memorize, recognize and name my source(s), not to validate my voice through the voice of an authority (for we, women, have little authority in the History of Literature, and wise women never draw their powers from authority), but to evoke her and sing. The bond between women and word. Among women themselves. To produce their full effect, words must, indeed, be chanted rhythmically, in cadences, off cadences. (119)
But talk as one must about these women and their search for an identity, a place of belonging and a safe home from which to speak, it immediately brings into reckoning the question of home and homelessness for the Indian women. After all the idea of homelessness when seen from the vantage point of women is not just a situational or economic idea, but at times chronic and irreparable. And out of the multiplicities of culture, race and political structures within India, grows also a repeated dialectic of uniformity and specificity: of world culture and national culture, of family, of home and of people. The project thus looks at the narrative identity inscribed by women writers from India, their differences from their western counterparts as also from each other. The primary vision of this project that’s seeks to unravel the heterogeneity invested within Indian culture can be best expressed in these words of Mohanty in *Feminism Without Borders*. She says:

> We are interested in the configuration of home, identity and community; more specifically, in the power and appeal of home as a concept and a desire, its occurrence as a metaphor in feminist writings, and its challenging presence in the rhetoric of the New Right. (85)

Not unlike Mohanty, each one of us is intrigued by questions about home. Each one of us has been asked such questions about home very frequently. The myriad questions that are hurled into one’s face invariably leave one wondering as to what home perhaps means or signifies. Does it refer to the place of one’s birth or does it refer to the place of one’s up bringing? Or perhaps it refers to one’s parent’s place of residence. Could it be the place where one has a job and therefore one lives? May be it refers to the place where one locates one’s culture or community.

Clearly then ‘home’ is not just a geographical space but even a historical space, emotional space, a cultural space and may be even more. Significantly the notion of home has been disassembled in a range of writings particularly by Indian women not just at a domestic level but in all its incarnations. The notion of ‘home’
becomes even more profoundly complicated when it deals with the identity, experiences and self of women. Home when viewed from the vantage point of women ceases to be that comfortable and familiar space but instead becomes an imaginatively charged space with many manifestations. Perhaps the feeling of familiarity and affection stems here from a sense of shared collective experience of social injustice and an emerging vision for a metamorphosis or change.

It is significant that the notion of 'home' as it pertains to women, is further complicated as a large number and variety of women cannot be considered a part of the home belonging to the feminist community as it has been constituted. As already stated, the notion of feminism as an all encompassing home doesn’t hold true anymore. Secondly, and more importantly, that there are discrete, coherent and absolutely separate 'identities'- homes within feminism, based on absolute divisions between various sexual, racial or ethnic identities is also a fallacy that needs to be challenged.

Any analysis of the geographical, emotional or even the intellectual construction of home or identity for women across cultures and borders has to deal with a few concerns: the first is a critique of hegemonic western feminist homes and the second is the construction of autonomous feminist homes that are historically, culturally and geographically grounded. In fact with respect to the literal home too, the point made by Partha Chaterjee is significant. He remarks in *The Nation and its Fragments*, “...what made the ridicule stronger was the constant suggestion that the Westernised woman was fond of useless luxury and cared little for the well being of the home.”(122)

Turning attention to the task of critiquing western feminist’s homes, it is pertinent to mention here that as spelt out earlier in the introduction, neither western feminist discourse nor western feminist practice is a monolithic category. However by suggesting the possibility of coherence among various kinds of feminisms in the west, one is simply alluding to the various textual strategies used
by writers to codify others as non-western and themselves as western. It is purely in this sense that the term western feminist is being employed.

However before any such oppositional categories are set up, it is inevitable that one turns to the term ‘colonization’, for the differences between the western and the non-western is supposed to do something with the experience of colonization. Notably, the purpose here is not so much to define it but to analyze its effects on the two supposed categories of women. Colonization after all, produces from the most evident economic and political hierarchies to a relationship of structural domination and oppression. Unfortunately such a suggestion invariably creates the threat of distorting western feminist practice as also of jeopardizing the possibility of coalition amongst western and ‘other’ feminists.

All this brings back one to the essential rhetoric about women. Before anything else, the central question that the feminist scholarship seeks to answer is the relationship between ‘woman’ and ‘women’. Where ‘woman’ refers to the cultural ‘other’ constructed through various kinds of representations, it is the word ‘women’ that actually refers to the real, material subjects of their collective histories. This dichotomy between ‘women’ as historical subjects and the representation of ‘woman’ is what need to be re-read and re-interrogated. In fact the texts that will be analyzed later unlike the common crop of feminist texts carefully avoid the dangers of colonizing the cultural and historical heterogeneity of the lives of women in the third world/India.

Otherwise the non-western women have inevitably been represented as a singular homogenous category bearing thus an image that carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse. What is even more troublesome that in their analysis of ‘sexual difference’, a monolithic notion of patriarchy is created which further leads to a reductive notion of third world difference. It is in the production of this supposed third world difference that these western feminisms continue to perpetuate colonial crimes.
The constitutive plurality and complexities that characterize the lives of these women, are appropriated to the extent of lets say, treating the ‘self’ and ‘identity’ of Indian women as synonymous with the Third world women. Spivak expresses her reservations about the same In Other Worlds, when she speaks about Kristeva’s representation of third world women in About Chinese Women. She says:

Her question, in the face of those silent women, is about her own identity rather than theirs... this too might be characteristic of the group of thinkers to whom, I have, most generally, attached her. in spite of their occasional interest in touching the other of the West, of metaphysics, of capitalism, their repeated question is obsessively self-centered. (137)

It is precisely through this process of homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the third world that power is once again exercised. The struggle of third world women is thus, not just a struggle against the patriarchal forces but also a struggle for control over the orientation and the regulation over their selfhood and identity.

But as Edward Said reassures in Orientalism:

One aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed. .. if the world has become immediately accessible to a western citizen living in the electronic age, the orient too has drawn nearer to him, and is now less a myth perhaps than a place criss-crossed by western interests.(136)

However, western feminist scholarship cannot escape the challenge of situating itself and examining its own role in such a global, economic and political framework.. This is not to say that the excellent ideas of western feminist writings should be done away with, but an attempt must be made to give voice to the
overwhelming generalizations about the experience of women in the non-western countries. One therefore needs to turn to the analytic principles in western feminist discourse on third world.

A significant problem with ethnocentric universal ‘homes’ is with the assumption about women as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests, desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location. The same applies to a notion of gender or even patriarchy that can be applied universally or cross culturally. Also another assumption is evident in the uncritical way, proof of universality and cross-cultural validity are provided.

As a result of all these strategies, a homogenous notion of the oppression of women as a group is assumed which in turn produces the image of an average third world woman. Such a third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her gender and her being third world (ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition bound, domesticated, family oriented, victimized etc in contrast to western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and freedom to make their own decisions.). The homogeneity of women as a group is produced not on the basis of biological essentials but rather on the basis of secondary sociological and anthropological universals. Thus, for instance, in any given piece of feminist analysis, women are characterized as a singular group on the basis of a shared oppression. What binds women together is a sociological notion of the sameness of their oppression.

It is due to this reason that elision takes place between women as a homogeneously constructed group and women as material subjects of their own history. Thus the seeming consensual homogeneity of women as group is incongruent with the historically specific material reality of groups of women.

Even the western theorists too have acknowledged the importance of a cultural theory. Elaine Showalter has written in her essay “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” that “A theory based on a model of women’s culture can prove, I
believe, a more complete and satisfying way to talk about the specificity and difference of women’s writing than theories based in biology, linguistics, or psychoanalysis.” But what these theorists overlook is the attention to the plurality of experience that such an analysis should entail.

Having said so, it becomes imperative that the image of third world women as popularized by the western world may be illustrated upon. A variety of writers have dealt with the representation of third world women in different ways but the effect of their representation of third world women is indeed a coherent one. In all these writings, women are defined as victims of male violence, as universal dependents, victims of the colonial process, and victims of Islamic code and finally victims of economic development process.

Clearly then the mode of defining these third world women primarily in terms of their object status needs to be both named and challenged. Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender alone, it must be forged in concrete historical and political practice and analysis. Besides it is almost always implied that third world women constitute an identifiable group purely on the basis of shared dependencies. Leela Gandhi expresses her reservations about the same in Postcolonial Theory. She remarks:

The prescription of non-western alterity as a tonic for the ill-health of western Culture heralds the perpetration of a neo-orientalism. Second, the metropolitan demand for marginality is also troublingly a command which consolidates and names the non-western interminably marginal. (84)

For instance a careful examination of statements about non-western women (Asian, African etc) would show how generalizations are sprinkled liberally throughout their range of writings. It is when these third world women become a homogenous, sociological grouping characterized by common dependencies or powerlessness that problems arise.
Homi K. Bhabha calls it ‘fetishism’ and explains it thus in *The Location of Culture* “the fetish or stereotype gives access to an identity which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure, as it is on anxiety or defense, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it.”( 107)

Descriptive gender differences are transformed into a combat between men and women. Women are constituted as a group through dependency relationships vis-à-vis men who are indirectly held responsible for these relationships. In a case as this, the analysis of specific historical differences becomes impossible because reality is always apparently structured by divisions – two mutually exclusive groups, the victims and the oppressors. However to facilitate a comprehensive analysis of the location of women, one cannot deny the historical specificity of women’s experience.

The problem with this analytic strategy is that it treats men and women as already constituted sexual-political subjects prior to their entry into the arena of social relations. However it is important to mention that women, as seen in this book too, are a product of various kinds of socio-economic and political relations as well as being implicated in forming the relationships. But as Homi. K. Bhabha says that we need not always polarize in order to polemicize, it is as much true here also, given the popular ‘fetish’ for stereotypes’ and contraries.

Michelle Rosaldo has stated “[w]oman’s place in human social life is not in any direct sense a product of the things she does but the meaning her activities acquire through concrete social interactions.” That is to say that if women mother in a variety of societies it is not as significant as the value attached to mothering in these societies. The distinction between the act of being a woman and the status attached to it is a very significant one.

The importance of context in narrative, its identification and analysis is extremely crucial to the understanding of women’s narrative. The notion of
interdependence between narrative theory and gender however is not a new one. What I wish to stress here is to understand the complex relationality that shapes the lives of women... the careful investigation of the narratives will reveal that while it is possible to retain the idea of multiple, fluid structures of domination that intersect to locate women differently in history, yet one cannot overlook the dynamic oppositional agency of individuals.

Retuning to the representation of third world women, in order to extricate them from the debilitating generality of object status, one has to find multiple contexts for explaining the diverse attributes of third world women.

Here I use C.T. Mohanty’s allusion to Dorothy Smith. She says while defining such contexts:

I discuss the following, socio-economic, political and discursive configurations: (1) colonialism, class and gender (2) state, citizenship and racial formation (3) multinational production and social agency (4) anthropology and third world women as native (5) consciousness, identity and writing. (57)

But such a historically specific analysis may well be countered by careful treading of the “margins of hybridity” where “cultural differences contingently and conflictually touch to illuminate not just subject specific reality but also a more important “borderline reality”.

These five configurations, if applied in totality are likely to provide a framework for the complete critique of third world women narratives. Though these are necessarily partial contexts meant to be suggestive rather than comprehensive, yet this is a possible cartography of contemporary women writing in third world. These configurations can be instrumental in suggesting new beginnings and middles and argue for more finely honed historical and context specific methods of feminist analysis. In facilitating the journey from ideas to the text, trying to stress the arbitrary and differential construction of cultural and
social signs, one hopes to unsettle the western idealist quest for meanings that are most often homogenous.

But it remains to be clarified that not all third world fictions, particularly those written by women are nationalistic. In fact in one strain of third world writing, the contradictory topoi of nation and exile are fused into a lament for the necessary and regrettable insistence of nation-forming, in which the woman proclaims her identity with a country whose artificality and exclusiveness has driven her into a kind of exile- a simultaneous recognition of nationhood/family and an alienation from it. Mahasweta Devi’s Mother of 1084 falls primarily in this category.

In fact strangely so, it is precisely this locally specifying nation/home/belonging vs homelessness/exile paradigm that also feeds the prospects of universalist tendencies. One of the many clear formulations of this can be found in Fanon’s statement that “it is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows.”(247-48)

Finally returning to the issue of diversity within feminism, my intention in this project is to realize a reinstitution of feminism in the singular. This is not to suggest that there is an intended return to the notion of a universal feminist subjectivity or a movement based on the assumption of female homogeneity. Nor does one intend to say that the foundational recognition of differences among women based on other systems of stratification such as race, class or sexuality is redundant and unwanted. In fact the cognizance of the same has led to an invaluable advance in feminist theory the acknowledgement of the same becomes all the more important in a case where the project deals with the constitutive elements of woman’s identity and the social order. Moreover, the processes by which race or class or sexuality mediate gender- and vice versa-are themselves key spaces for coalitional activism.
The same may also be expressed in the words of Stuart Hall who says in “New Ethnicities”:

We are beginning to see constructions of just such a new conception of ethnicity; a new cultural politics which engages rather than suppresses difference, and which depends, in part, on the cultural construction of new ethnic identities. ...However there is a difference which makes a radical and unbridgeable separation; and there is a difference which is positional, conditional and conjunctural, closer to Derrida’s notion of difference......that is to say a recognition that we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture. (202)

All that it means is that the project seeks to forge a vision that is simultaneously situated in a specific locale, global in scope, and constantly in motion through space and time. While it acknowledges the historically and geographically specific forms in which feminism emerges, takes root, changes, travels, translates and transplants in different spatio-temporal contexts, yet sees points of convergence and confluence.

In conclusion, this all-too-rapid excursion through the temporal and the spatial rhetoric of feminism across the globe was not intended to be an exercise in tracking tropes as an end in itself. The hypothesis simply intends to reflect the belief that the feminist rhetoric has an epistemological register that is responsive to changing historical and locational conditions. Paying close attention in turn, to this cultural epistemology provides a window into the interpenetration of language and narrative formations as products and shapers of their times and places.

The explosion of spatial rhetoric in this project as also the development of locational feminism is at once geographically inflected and global in scope but without the erasure of differences. It intends to pay careful attention to the local
idiom of feminist formations, the status of women and the ways in which particular gender systems interact with other systems of stratification like class, caste, religion, sexuality, race, ethnicity, regional and national identity and so forth. While the project seeks to travel through multiple contact zones and narrative identities, yet it calls at the end for the re-singularisation of feminism.

The three texts taken up for analysis, will help understand the myriad significations of gender, its different and diverse local manifestations with attention to regional (Mother of 1084), national (Home) and transnational (Manhattan Music) nexus within which local conditions and resistance develop. The same the project will accomplish by mapping, crossing borderlands and migrating from one narrative to the other.

Home, by Manju Kapur, that deals with the life of women ensconced in the domestic space of their homes, is the first step in the direction of vigilance to the politics of location. Though predicated on a saga about domestic space alone, yet the project studies it by Mapping it as a place where contradictions are enacted. It's not a comfortable territory to live in and identity for women ensures clashing differences and fixed limits.

If mapping the contours and intersections within the domestic space is the first step in this direction, the second is accomplished by crossing the Borderlands of the home space and venturing into a narrative (Mother of 1084) that has as its backdrop the political and historical set up. The narrative reveals not just psychological, political and cultural borderlands but as the liminal space in between, also reveals the interface of self and the other as also the paradoxical processes of connection and separation. Borders are the places where murderous acts take place but also act as porous sites of mixing and coalition. The narrative deals precisely with such acts and the identity of women as they travel across the borders of their home space.
Finally the third step in locating the identity of women is undertaken through *Manhattan Music* by Meena Alexander. With this text, the project migrates, out of nation space. Dealing with the experiences of an immigrant woman, the narrative, redefines space. A narrative that speaks of travels back and forth and diaspora it reflects upon the fluidity of identity as it traverses multiple locations and spaces.

Having travelled through these spaces, the project envisions finally combining the *global* with the *local* and to show how the two are co-complicit, each implicated in the other. The ‘glocational’ (term used by Roland Robertson) nature of the project is not unlike the concept of trans-national feminism which respects the material and cultural specificities of local formations but also analyses how the gender system in one location is linked to the other.

Lest the reinstatement of feminism in the singular sound defeatist, I would like to explain the inevitability of a circular premise in the words of Ursula K. Le Guin as cited in *Critical Inquiry*. She says:

When a hoop snake wants to get somewhere—whether because the hoop snake is after something, or because something is after the hoop snake—it takes its tail into its mouth, thus forming itself into a hoop and rolls...they are venomous snakes, and when they bite their own tale they die, in the awful agony, of snakebite. All progress has these hitches. And the moral of that is, you have to form a circle to escape from the circle. If we could truly form a circle, joining the beginning and the end, we would, as another Greek remarked, not die. (189)

The aim of this project is thus to make all these engagements visible—surveillance of surveillances, the discursive scrutiny of deployed subjectivities. In the process, while there might be inventiveness in the locations, a related hope for the potential selves these women might be, yet the cultural maps and paths may
be unclear, the narrative signposts and borders a bit confusing and crossing or migrating itself precarious and in need of continuous redefinition. However despite the goings on of this hoop, one believes it will articulate and ramify the myriad self narratives of contemporary Indian women.