Chapter 1

Ruptures in Feminist Discourse

To see like a feminist is not to stabilize, it is to destabilize. The more we understand, the more our horizons shift.

Nivedita Menon, _Seeing like a Feminist_

This research entails an analysis of fiction by women writers from different cultural locations. The study will enable us to articulate the effects of culture, location and history on their writings. This cross-cultural, intercontinental study is to facilitate and foreground the inherent diversity in feminism. The inquiry into global perspective of feminism necessitates reading of women writers from different locations. The pluralist reading of feminism is a step against the reductive essentialism that has come to be associated with it. The aim is to bring into focus the evolving nature of feminism as opposed to the obsoleteness that has come to be associated with it in recent times.

The authors selected for detailed study represent a wide cultural spectrum. They have recreated fictional yet true representations of women and the corresponding social milieu in which they are located. This study focuses on the novels by women writers because it is in them that one can most clearly see women creating alternative realities. Alternative certainly does not mean separate or irrelevant. The novels are a result of reflections on the experiences of real women and these forays into fiction may provide the blueprints for the future.

Literature emerged as a result of the universal impulse of humanity to share its experiences and to tell personal stories to others. It is impossible to ignore this dialogical emphasis and communal nature of literary experience. Feminist writers in various communities have also emerged as a result of this dialogical urge of humanity. Their narratives demonstrate the need for women to articulate their concerns which originate as a result of their location and difference of experience. These narratives bring into focus the appeal from women in society to evolve new theoretical grounds in feminism. A comparative study of Carolyn Heilbrun’s _Death in_
A Tenured Position, Bapsi Sidhwa’s Water, Sarojini Sahoo’s The Dark Abode and Amma Darko’s Beyond the Horizon gives a small glimpse into some of the concerns of feminist writers in different locations. This study has been made in the light of the available feminist epistemologies which are constantly in flux.

The first part of this chapter maps the evolution of feminism in theory and practice in order to fathom its trajectories. The debates on equality, essentialism and difference within feminist discourse have been taken up to assess the future of feminism. The next part of this chapter is a brief introduction of gynocritics from the three continents and their chosen works for analysis. The concluding part of this chapter suggests that differences should not preclude cross-cultural communication. The gains from various cultural locations could be used for furthering the cause of women all over the world. As a way forward, this research is an attempt towards finding primacy of overlapping feminist concerns. This trans-continental comparative study attempts to reveal the diverse social processes and recurring motifs in order to find out what constantly reappears in various guises in women’s narratives. It is an attempt to salvage feminism as a movement from petering into dry tributaries and losing the momentum of combined surge with which it initially took off.

The ability to make choices is perhaps an essential ingredient of human existence. Here no single definition will suffice. Freedom is a state of inner consciousness; it relates to what one expects from life, and the scales will vary from person to person. Indira Gandhi in her address at the All India women’s conference in 1980 said, “To be liberated, a woman must feel free to be herself, not in rivalry to man but in the context of her own capacity and her personality.”

Feminism is a global and revolutionary ideology which started with the questioning of power forces that have dominated women all over the world; it addresses the question of power and its retribution. Feminist uprisings took place in diverse settings without a common ground or an organised strategy. Each woman who has experienced oppressive patriarchal politics must have devised certain strategy of resistance. These strategies are not found in an organised and sustained way yet they represent corpus of methodology of feminist action. The study of women writers across cultures enables us to probe and share strategies of resistance against oppression by women in different cultures.
Feminism takes on the monumental challenge of interrogating the relationship between systems of domination. It is a kind of cultural reconditioning through a positive transformation of women’s identity and that too on their own constitutive terms. Feminist movement has a vision of achieving social justice for entire women community. It attempts to emancipate women from the dependency syndrome. The issues associated with feminism have aspects that are universal and culture-specific at the same time. Judith Butler also associates the movement of feminism with “the social transformation of gender relations” (Undoing Gender 204).

In 1983 Alison Jaggar comfortably claimed that “all feminism address the same problem: what constitutes the oppression of women and how can that oppression be ended” (124). However, this simplistic definition of feminism seems misplaced in contemporary feminist debates. If we map the developments in feminism in recent decades we realize the ruptures in the movement. The exuberant variety in feminism that tends to evade any classification under a unified agenda is quite evident. According to Teresa de Lauretis, “To rupture the coherence of address” in feminism is to “dislocate meaning”, to destabilize theory and “to open up a space of contradiction in which to demonstrate the non coincidence of woman and women” (1984: 7). This rupture in feminist discourse, though not withstanding, opens up new vistas of exploration and enriches it further.

Feminism as a movement started when the personal became the political. However, now the thrust of feminism seems to be in the opposite direction; personal and individual has taken precedence over political. Plural, individualistic voices are shaking the internal cohesion of a movement which started as a universal revolution with a common agenda. Feminism is viewed as the recognition of the systematic discrimination against women on the grounds of gender and the commitment to work towards a change. Within this definition, one needs to find a place for different kinds of feminism that have emerged: liberal, radical, socialist, Marxist, black or African feminism and so on.

Nancy Cott makes a distinction between modern feminism and its antecedents, particularly the struggle for suffrage. In the United States she places the turning point in the decades before and after women obtained the right to vote in 1920 (1910–1930). She argues that the earlier women’s movement was primarily about woman as
a universal entity, whereas over this twenty years period it has transformed itself into one primarily concerned with social differentiation, attentive to individuality and diversity. New issues deal more with woman’s condition as a social construct, gender identity, and relationships within and between genders.

Although oppression of women and secondary status of women are universal phenomena, the causes underlying them and the justification put forth may differ from culture to culture. “Cultural difference has been a focal point of contention when women debate on identity politics, the politics of ‘difference’, and solidarity among women across racial, cultural, and religious boundaries” (Pui-Lan 23). It is therefore, necessary to concentrate on the culture specific aspects associated with feminism. The articulation of distinctiveness of the context becomes pertinent in the present scenario. In order to truly fathom the plethora of critical positions available within feminism it becomes necessary to study a variety of feminist positions across cultures. This will enable us to convey some sense of heterogeneity of the field, the multiplicity of voices and complicated set of relations. It will also help us to gain an insight into the development of debates within feminist theory.

The feminist writers have focused on multiple signifying systems of cultural ramifications of the subjugation of women and have brought them centre stage in their respective artistic creations. In order to build a platform for critical discussion by analysing women writers from various geographical and diverse cultural contexts it becomes important to first understand the development of feminism as a political movement and its repercussions in literature.

A synoptic view of the evolution of feminism and its epistemological framework would be useful in the study of feminist issues in diverse settings. The genesis of feminism in the west as a political ideology can be traced back to the early 18th century. Feminism has been categorized by historians into three waves. The first wave of feminism which dates back to 1930’s when women in the west raised their voice to gain legal rights, political power and suffrage for women. The second wave of feminist movement in the west is associated with women’s demand of equality right with men and a radical movement of 1960’s and 1970’s. According to Vidyut Bhagwat, “This feminist thought of the late 1960’s and 1970’s provides a historical context to feminist theory” (x). The third wave of feminism started in early 1990’s
when women informed with post-structuralism and deconstruction started reclaiming their identity and women from other parts of the world too joined in the movement and proposed a postcolonial and black feminism. The insights emerging from post-structuralism, deconstruction, post-colonialism, psychoanalysis and queer theory were embraced by feminist critics for seeking new ways of articulating the problems of human subjectivity. As Franks opines, “Feminist scholarship is enriched by adopting positive insights of post-structuralism, deconstructionism and critical theory in respect of power relations but if the resulting analyses are merely textual and not located within social and historical contexts then they are divorced from the possibility of political action.”

Third wave feminism seeks to challenge what it deems the second wave’s essentialist definitions of feminism, claiming that these definitions over-emphasised the experiences of upper middle-class white women and largely ignored the circumstances of lower class women, minorities and women living in other cultures. Their contention was that there is often a tendency to conflate and homogenise different geographies and histories of these nations under an essentialist umbrella term of ‘third-world feminism’ under which all differences are erased. If we try to trace sources of feminist theories we find that there is no one theory that can circumscribe the area of feminist discourse. Feminist theories did not develop in a vacuum but rather emerged alongside the social and cultural theories of their times. Feminism depends on the already available repertoire of theory and continues to be informed by the current trends and epistemologies. It uses them for furthering its own cause without attributing any final truth value to any particular theory. “There is no unchanging feminist orthodoxy, no settled feminist conventions, and no static feminist analysis. Feminism is diverse and dynamic as the changes within feminism in the last sixteen years alone are testament to this” (Kemp, Sandra and Judith Squires 12). Thus, discontinuity and heterogeneity marks the evolution of feminist discourse.

Contemporary feminism is fraught with difference of opinion regarding the definition of feminism. Some feminists are of the view that there is no difference between sexes and it is the social conditioning that is responsible for the differentiation and discrimination of women. On similar grounds some feminists are essentialist in their approach and are of the view that men and women are essentially different and this certainly should not be the reason for discrimination of women. The
third wave of feminist movement has brought in its wake debates of equality, essentialism and difference and has further challenged the notion of “universal womanhood.” The ‘difference debate’ is further complicated by differences among women themselves on the basis of class, race, age and sexual orientation.

The social construct of gender bias has been discussed by Simon de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949). As an existentialist, De Beauvoir accepted the precept that “existence precedes essence”, hence, “one is not born a woman but becomes one” (301). Her analysis focused on the social construction of woman as the quintessential ‘other’ by the patriarchal ideology, as fundamental to women’s oppression. Beauvoir insists that women must see themselves as autonomous beings. They must reject the societal construct that men are the subject or the absolute and that women are the ‘other’ because embedded in this assumption is the supposition that males have power to define cultural terms and roles. As opposed to this women must define themselves outside the present social construct and reject being labeled as the ‘other’. “De Beauvoir’s distinction between biological sex and the social creation of the ‘eternal feminine’ is a precursor of the distinction between sex and gender that is common in much feminist theory” (Freedman 14). The debates on gender as a social construct; a part of patriarchal strategy still continues. Most feminist critics now are of the opinion that the only way to contend with patriarchal bias against women is by accepting the sexual difference and fighting tooth and nail against the gender hierarchies inherent in division, oppression, inequality and ingrained inferiority for women in the social systems.

The founding principles and grounds of debate within feminism have changed and multiplied. The course of feminist theory and practice has been profoundly altered with the interface with new knowledge and unveiling of unexplored cultures.

There are a variety of feminist positions and strategies adopted by women from various cultures to put forth their concerns. From diverse directions new forms of feminism are emerging that continue to examine the complexity of gendered

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1 The debate between sameness and difference represents a recurring theme within feminist thought. Even though they share a common goal- attaining women’s equality with men – the parties of this debate are polarized around the question of strategy. On the side of sameness are feminists who emphasize the similarities between sexes and argue that women should be treated just like men. However, on the other side of debate, stressing the difference between the sexes are feminists who point to the unique experiences of being a woman.
identities in contemporary society. Presently, feminism has embraced multiplicity and diverse forms of interventions which are still evolutionary. Feminist theory has not yet calcified into a fossilized theory and is still in the process of evolving and breaking new ground.

The strength of feminism lies in the fact that feminist criticism has not severed its umbilical cords from the already available repertoire of ideological positions. It borrows and even revises these theoretical tools for its concerns. It is somewhat ‘bricolage’ in its approach towards theory; it persistently critiques its own findings.

“Unlike many other ‘isms’ feminism does not derive its theoretical or conceptual base from any single theoretical formulation. There is therefore no specific abstract definition of feminism applicable to all women at all times.... The definition thus can and does change because feminism is based on historically and culturally concrete realities and levels of consciousness, perceptions and actions” (Chaudhuri 4).

Liberal feminism is about equality of men and women through political and legal reforms. Liberal feminism is of the view that equality between men and women is possible without changing the essential structure of the society. Liberal feminism does not regard the oppression of women as a structural feature of the capitalist economic system, and does not advocate overthrowing that system. Instead it looks to the state to bring about women’s liberation through legislative measures. Some women feel that feminism largely misses the point by defining liberation as the freedom to act as a man. They feel that this idea overlooks many of the unique qualities that women have that are not necessarily tied to equality. Also according to bell hooks, “if feminism means equality with men then they should also be aware of

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7 In *The Savage Mind* (1962), Claude Lévi-Strauss defines the concept of “bricolage” as a method of expression through the selection and synthesis of components culled from surrounding culture. Lévi-Strauss describes the “bricoleur,” whose expression depends on his re-appropriation of “a collection of oddments left over from human endeavours,” in order to argue that bricolage is necessarily situated within “a particular state of civilization.” The bricoleur must “make do with ‘whatever is at hand,’” choosing from a finite set of tools and materials which “bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project,” unlike the figure of the “engineer,” who has available all the “raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project.” Lévi-Strauss further asserts that the set of possible uses for each component available to the bricoleur is limited, because each component retains some residual properties and fragments of meaning relevant to its original purpose. He holds that placing the materials in a new context, however, can alter their meaning, suggesting that as a methodology, bricolage empowers those with fewer resources. Lévi-Strauss states that bricolage constitutes a reversal of ends and means: one creator’s “end” becomes part of another’s “means” of self-expression.
the fact that men are also not equals in a capitalist and class ridden society. The questions that will haunt the feminist movement with an aim towards equality with men; which men do women want to be equal to? Do women share a common vision of what equality means?"(19). The question itself is a rhetorical one. Feminism should simultaneously combat other forms of political and social subordination, since for many women, embracing the goal of equality with the men of their class, race or nation would mean accepting a still oppressed status.

Radical feminism, which is also associated with the second wave of feminism in the west, is informed by Marxist ideology. According to radical feminists the defining feature of women’s oppression is the capitalist sexist hierarchy in the society. According to Joseph and Lewis, “The radical feminist tendency vehemently identified men as the agents of oppression and argues that all other forms of exploitation and oppression (racism, capitalism, imperialism, etc.) are all extensions of male supremacy” (55). These feminists believe that the oppression of women can end only through radical changes and total reconstruction of the social structure. They reject liberal feminism’s willingness to work within the basic framework of society. They see sexism starting with human reproduction where the gender division which starts with procreation extends into every aspect of human existence. Radical feminists depict a world where men control women’s bodies and force women into motherhood or sexual slavery. They endorse the view that women need space, a space free from male intrusion where women can nurture each other, regain control over their own bodies, and develop a woman culture.

When black women protested against the inattention and neglect of the lived experience of racism by radical feminists and liberal feminists, the idea of a common women’s culture had to be revised. The essentialist idea of ‘woman’ and her concerns also came under a scanner. This neglect rendered second wave feminism’s theoretical framework and categories inappropriate and its practices problematic in other countries. What came forth was definitely not a unified agenda; concerns varied not only from culture to culture but also from person to person. Hence, making universal claims again proved detrimental to the feminist struggle in certain cases. The feminist strategies of a particular nation could not be simply implanted on another nation. For
instance, the western feminism’s take on Hijab resulted in protests by Muslim women in many parts of the world. It amounted to a cultural intrusion by western feminists. However, until very recently the African women’s movement was quite averse to the Western feminist attack on genital mutilation. Now there is a growing conviction that genital mutilation is indeed in breach of human rights and needs to be curbed. With such interactive nature of feminism, women from various cultures stand to gain immensely. Unique knowledge of women from various cultures should not be ignored because of its uniqueness. It is also true that the dominant groups cannot make sense of that knowledge and perceive it as irrelevant. Yet it is precisely their uniqueness that gives these insights their great value. If feminism has to become a global movement it has to be receptive to all kind of knowledge however unique it might be. Feminism should redefine the ways of knowing and in tandem facilitate new understandings of feminist struggles in different cultures. For this difference needs to be fore grounded.

Arriving at an acceptable universal definition of feminism or of what it is that constitutes feminist research is problematic. This is because the patriarchal relations, against which feminisms constitute a resistance, differ in their configuration from place to place. It is evident that the contexts in which feminist research is carried out differ considerably. ‘Situated’ experience leads to ‘situated’ knowledge and consequently there are diverse feminisms which include both secular feminisms and feminisms within religions. That which is progressive in one situation may be retrogressive in another. (Franks)

The cultures which had been hitherto muted needed to be given a voice, a platform from where they could speak about their specific problems. Feminist theory and practice underwent a fundamental change when women from Africa and other ‘third world’ countries challenged ‘gender ‘as the only factor that affected their fate. Women are affected differently by patriarchy in different social groups, whether these are differences in race, class, sexuality or whatever other socio-cultural sets. Chandra Talpade Mohanty also asserts the view that ideologies of womanhood have as much

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1 The veiling or seclusion of women in some Islamic societies customarily practiced in order to maintain standards of modesty. Hijab is a veil which covers the head which is particularly worn by a Muslim female beyond the age of puberty in the presence of non-related adult males.
to do with class and race as they have to do with sex. Within feminist thought there appeared to be a difference of opinion regarding the perspective of feminism. There was a paradigm shift in focus when women from the margins started voicing their perspective. Consequently, there are so many strands of feminism prevalent today that one talks in terms of feminisms now.

Black feminism foregrounds race as a chief cause of women’s exploitation and believes that sexism and racism are inextricably linked and inseparable in their case. A mere liberation from sexist ideology will not bring an end to their oppression unless racist inequalities too are addressed by feminism. Alice Walker coined a special term for Black Feminism: ‘Womanism’ in her collection of essays entitled “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens”, published in 1983.

According to Neerja Chand:

The need to formulate such an approach arises from the fact that the historical and social realities surrounding African women are essentially different from those of western white women. Even though the experience of women’s oppression as women’s experience is universal, obvious major inherent contradictions like dominant patriarchy and traumas of a colonial experience lend a different dimension to their experience as African women. (12)

Postcolonial and ‘third-world’ feminists too revolted against the western feminist movements that did not include cultural and post colonial issues related to their contexts. They were of the opinion that ideas of feminism are primarily premised on ‘western’ notions of individualism. The women from developing nations felt excluded from the straitjacket western models of feminist theories. Western feminism has been silent about the concerns of these doubly marginalised women. The progress

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4 The term womanist first appeared in Alice Walker’s In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose (1983), in which the author attributed the word’s origin to the black folk expression of mothers to female children, ‘You acting womanish,’ i.e. like a woman … usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful behaviour. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered ‘good’ for one … [A womanist is also] a woman who loves other women sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture … and women’s strength … committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist … Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (pp. xi-xii)
made by feminists in these countries was being evaluated according to western standards. Post-colonial and ‘third-world’ feminists also raised their voice against their portrayal by the west as exotic, uncivilized, passive, and voiceless. According to women from the developing countries Western feminist attitude was painfully similar to the white man’s burden, where the civilizing mission was a feigned agenda for the most heinous intellectual suppression. When white feminists ignore the contributions by women of colour to feminism the white women act unjustly, and their actions have serious consequences far beyond the perpetuation of ignorance. Women of colour are marginalized by the neglect of white feminists and feminism as a body of knowledge is impoverished. “Consequently, feminism, as appropriated and defined by the West, has too often become a tool of cultural imperialism” (Chaudhuri 36). Women from Africa and the Indian subcontinent even revolted against ‘sisterhood’ in feminism which, according to them, was nothing short of patronizing attitude of western feminists to gain favour from women in Africa and India. Thus, women from various non-western countries and immigrant women from hyphenated cultural existence clamoured for a space to voice their unique feminist concerns. The women from different post colonial countries did not accept one frame or slot under which their issues could be categorized. Each country has its own history and cultural baggage and it could not be homogenized under one umbrella term of ‘postcolonial feminism’. Thus, the specificities of politics in different locations could not be erased. This resulted in separate nomenclature and agenda for each colony which had been under the colonial rule. They were against ahistoricizing and generalizing impulses of the west under ‘post colonial’ or ‘third world’ feminism. According to them it obliterated the difference of culture, political history and race.

Post-structuralism also has had a deep seated impact on ideologies which were hitherto considered rational as well as traditional. Feminism and its various manifestations is one such spin off of the post-structural sway of events. As Linda Nicholson and Nancy Fraser point out:

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5 The term sisterhood is used among feminists to express the connection of women who are not biologically related but are bonded in solidarity. The sisterhood of women often refers to their feminism, their participation in the women’s movement, their support of other women or their recognition of female qualities that are unique to women’s nature. The use of the word sisterhood implies that women relate to one another in ways that are distinct from how they relate to men although not necessarily exclusive of relation to men.
In recent years, poor and working-class women, women of colour, and lesbians have finally won a wider hearing for their objections to feminist theories which fail to illuminate their lives and address their problems. They have exposed the earlier quasi-meta-narratives, with their assumptions of universal female dependence and confinement to the domestic sphere, as false extrapolations from the experience of the white, middle-class, heterosexual women who dominated the beginnings of the second wave. . . . Thus, as the class, sexual, racial and ethnic awareness of the movement has altered, so has the preferred conception of theory. (33)

Since post-structuralism threatens universal constructs, feminism itself came under its attack and could no longer remain a ‘unified subject’. In the early 1990s, feminist theory was polarized by the growth of post-modern and post-structural theory. The post-structural approach on feminism rejects any possibility of defining women at all. In contrast to the liberal humanist assumptions of the unified, rational self, post-structuralism and more specifically feminist post-structuralism proposes a subject which is fragmentary and contradictory. Feminist post-structuralism rejects the concept of an essential, unified female nature, and feminist post-structuralism offers, as Weedon suggests, “a contextualisation of experience and an analysis of its constitution and ideological power” (125). The advantage of this strategy lies in the fact that an awareness of the contradictory nature of subjectivity highlights the possibility of choice in different situations and between different discourses. Most feminist discourses have attempted to offer alternative models of femininity. Here it becomes important to note that femininity is a set of culturally defined characteristics. The question is, whether it is desirable for feminists to try to fix the meaning of femininity. Would it not amount to another essentialist framework and falling into the trap of patriarchal binaries? Chris further argues:

The fixing of meaning is necessary for social life but in allying meaning to true essential non-patriarchal femininity, such discourse inevitably attempts to fix femininity once and for all. Post-structuralist feminism, on the other hand, committed as it is to the principle of difference and deferral, never fixes meaning once and for all. For post-structuralism femininity and masculinity are constantly in process and
subjectivity, which most discourses seek to fix, is constantly subject to dispersal. (99)

The post-structural feminists use this approach to deconstruct all definitions of women whether feminist or sexist arguing that all attempts at defining women as a category are politically reactionary and ontologically mistaken. This approach suggests going beyond gender where the politics of gender or sexual difference must be replaced with a plurality of difference; where gender loses its position of significance. One of the most influential works from this position is of Judith Butler who embraced post structuralism to substantiate her feminist theory. According to her, “the term woman fails to be exhaustive . . . because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (3). She goes a step further by disengaging sex from nature, “Gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or a ‘natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘prediscursive,’ prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts” (Butler, Gender Trouble: 7).

On the other hand there were feminist theorists who argued that the attack on foundations of feminism, i.e. gender by postmodernism would eventually deconstruct feminism out of existence. These debates were further complicated by their imbrications with on-going arguments about feminism and race that had come to the fore in the 1980s. For some feminists of colour, postmodern feminism provided a lever with which to dislodge a still univocal, mainstream feminist theory, while for others, it constituted yet another elitist discourse bound to marginalize women of colour. For Linda J. Nicholson:

Postmodernism is not only a natural ally but also provides a basis for avoiding the tendency to construct theory that generalizes from experiences of western, white, middle class women. Postmodernism offers feminism some useful ideas about generalizations which transcend boundaries of culture and region. (5)
The postmodernist theory enables feminism to articulate the inherent diversity and contradictions that result from various positions. Post-structural feminism uses the findings of multitude of epistemologies like psychoanalysis, deconstruction, linguistics, race theory etc. Judith Butler has attempted to liberate gender from biological sex by proposing a theory in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990) that shows how gender becomes "performative" rather than a fixed entity. Gender norms or roles are established and policed in society through various institutions of power. She further problematizes ‘woman’ as a category and brings in aspects like class, ethnicity, sexuality and other facets of identity that complicate the enquiry. Hence, her findings again take us to the conclusion that there is no single cause for women’s subordination and hence, there cannot be a universal monolithic way to address this subordination.

However, feminism differs from post-structuralism in terms of precedence that it gives to authorial intention, context and location as against post-structuralism. Once again the fundamental problem is the extent to which a philosophical form of critique that rejects any type of certainty or value judgement conflicts with, or even undermines, feminist politics whose principle aim of overcoming the subordination of women necessarily rests on certain basic value judgements and truth claims. (McNay 2)

The essential motive behind feminism is more in sync with the progressive modern theory which has faith in the justice and the system.

The difference between women and even the divisions within the category ‘women’ leave us with the question of whether gender still remains a viable political identity. Thus, it becomes difficult to define and circumscribe feminism owing to its inherent heterogeneous and complex nature. There is a kind of splintering going on within feminism. Feminism has been strongly informed by post-colonial and post-structural frameworks which direct feminist discussions towards new takes on multiple identities. If feminism is to retain any form of cohesive identity it must find a common commitment and this common commitment would be the emancipatory

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6 In regarding gender in terms of performance of performativity, Judith Butler rejects any notion of a category that precedes social discourse. Gender for her is always performed, and this performance of gender is entirely a social matter with identity manifested in performativity.
project. It is worthwhile to note that the differences within feminism converge in an interesting fashion with an appeal to the meta-narrative of justice. Thus, feminism in all forms is committed to emancipatory social change. Feminism as a political movement comes in a variety of ideological forms. One central topic of concern for feminists has been to uncover and articulate those areas of knowledge where women’s experience had hitherto been treated as irrelevant and had been suppressed by patriarchy.

While feminist theories rely mostly on philosophy developed in the academies and universities of the west, ideas that have their genesis in larger world and from outside the enclaves of academia have since the second half of the twentieth century inflected, critiqued and modified the earlier insular theoretical tradition, making feminist theories self-critical and infinitely richer. Feminist theories as we understand them today encompass thinking about not only gender but also other demarcations of difference including race, class, sexuality, cultural context and other social categories. Revisionary feminist critics believe that feminist criticism has traditionally been the bastion of Western, white, intellectual, heterosexual, middle and upper-class women. These revisionists seek to effect change within the movement by promoting an agenda of multiculturalism, globalism, sensitivity to political and economic issues involving women, and the inclusion of texts by and about non-white women. Also, unlike their forbearers, contemporary feminist critics profess to be less interested in affirming their equality with men than exploring the differences that make women’s position in society unique. Across these concerns, there has been a recent focus on those writing from, or about, the geographical and cultural margins by those from Asia, Africa, South America, Eastern Europe and minorities within first world countries. This has served to extend the empirical as well as political agenda of feminism. In this positive sense, there has been widespread incorporation of multiple perspectives widening the notion of what constitutes feminist agenda. Imelda Whelehan points out:

Feminism draws its strength from its diversity and its various strands remain united in their position to patriarchy and male domination. The existence of an active debate confirms the richness of the feminist discourse, which is constantly diversifying and shifting ground in an effort to undercut the hegemony of male discourse. (2)
Feminist writers focus on multiple signifying systems of female literary tradition. It is from this local-global interface that new theories of gendered spaces, transnational perspectives and suggestions for political interventions are emerging. And this kind of feminist theory should form the core of transnational feminist praxis. As Sawaswati Raju notes while discussing how to 'talk across worlds':

There is absolutely no denial for a need, even in a politicized struggle, to question universalizing theories and meta-narratives and to engage in intense debates about differences among women and about listening to multiple voices . . . theories will have to move constantly between the ‘micro’ and the ‘macro’, and attend to how ideas originate and travel across space to assume specificities, and yet retain some similarities.

Now a relational and dynamic gender category anchored in place and differentiated by other social dimensions including those of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, continues to inform feminism. What feminism continues to give to society is a commitment to gender justice. It attempts to focus on the usually unequal place of women and an imperative to alleviate this in some way. In the process, core concepts have undergone a transformation as the very notion of, for example, ‘gender’ becomes a relational, contested, differentiated, place-based and ‘performative’ category.

The present trajectories and schisms in the feminist discourse are informed by postmodernism. Just as postmodernism claims the non-availability of a privileged meta-discourse capable of capturing once and for all the truth of every first order discourse; it follows for feminism that a legitimating, universal epistemic and political truth about feminism cannot reside in any philosophical meta-narrative. In the postmodern era legitimating becomes plural, local and immanent. Thus, social identities of women too are complex and heterogeneous.

While theorists like Sandra Harding and Seyla Benhabib worry about postmodernism leading us down a relativist path, other feminists raise different kinds of concerns. Particularly disturbing to some is whether the category of gender can survive the postmodern critique. If postmodernism advocates against the use of cross-cultural categories, what then happens to the category of gender? If postmodernism is about abandonment of all universal claims, would not the end result be the
philosophical doctrine that there are no realities other than concrete individual objects?

Nancy Hartstock and Susan Bordo argue that theorising needs some stopping points and that for feminists an important theoretical stopping point is gender. To invoke the ideal of endless difference is for feminism either to self-destruct or to finally accept ontology of abstract individualism. Postmodernism must avoid any simple celebration of difference or of particularity for its own sake. The mere abstract invocation of difference could theoretically be used in service of conservative ends. Postmodernism must reject a description of itself as embodying a set of timeless ideals contrary to those of modernism; it must insist on being recognised as a set of viewpoints of a time, justifiable only within its own time.

Contemporary feminism is a diverse and pluralistic enterprise, “arising not from monolithic design but from interplay of factors and forces at its best understood not as a discrete definable position which can be adopted or rejected; but as an emerging coherency which is being fed by a variety of currents, sometimes overlapping, sometimes quite distinct” (Bordo 459). Gender is not an isolated issue, by resisting over simplification and linking it to other power structures operating in society there is a need for more complex models of intervention that perceive woman’s oppression linked to larger issues of social exploitation. Carolyn Heilbrun in *Towards a Recognition of Androgyny* also argues that “our future salvation lies in a movement away from sexual polarization and the prison of gender” (ix).

Teresa de Lauretis too sees emerging in feminist writings “the concept of a multiple, shifting and often self-contradictory identity . . . an identity made up of heterogeneous and heteronomous representations of gender, race and class and often indeed across languages and cultures; an identity that one decides to reclaim from a history of multiple assimilations, and that one insists on as a strategy.” The female subject according to Lauretis “is a site of differences . . . that are not only sexual or only racial, economic or (sub) cultural, but all of these together, and often enough at odds with one another” (1986:15). The question that needs to be answered is; are we past the point where we can speak of a cohesive movement? De Lauretis reflects the changing emphasis within feminism which she claims has moved feminist theory into a position which she sees as “resisting closure of definition” (1980: 130).
The future of feminist criticism lies in the interpenetration of different national traditions and the multiplication of all differences be it national, racial, sexual or class. Feminism as movement will not gain through segregation or a claim of national superiority. The eradication of one institution of oppression needs to be accompanied and strengthened by supporting struggles to end any other form of oppression. There should be no ambivalence regarding oppression. All forms of oppressions are interrelated. The fight against sexist oppression is of grave significance and it is not for women only. Feminist movement has ignited other liberation struggles as well.

Transnational feminist theory aims to merge postmodern theory with greater consciousness to race and a nation’s history associated with Third World Women’s feminism. An increasingly transnational sphere of public and academic discourse impels all social theorists to make sense of the politics of difference within multicultural societies. Transnational Feminism is a contemporary paradigm. The name highlights the difference between international and transnational conceptions of feminism, and favours the latter. As a feminist approach, it can be said that transnational feminism is generally attentive to intersections among nationhood, race, gender, sexuality and economic exploitation on a world scale, in the context of emergent global capitalism. Transnational feminists inquire into the social, political and economic conditions comprising imperialism; their connections to colonialism and nationalism; the role of gender, the state, race, class, and sexuality in the organization of resistance to hegemonies in the making and unmaking of nation and nation-state. Transnational feminist practice is attentive to feminism as both a liberatory formation and one with long standing ties to colonialism, racism and imperialism. As such, it resists utopic ideas about “global sisterhood” while simultaneously working to lay the groundwork for more productive and equitable social relations among women across borders and cultural contexts. The concept of transnational feminism offers the desirability and possibility of a political solidarity of feminists across the globe that transcends class, race, sexuality and national boundaries. Trans-nationalism in feminism begins with a genuine, respectful engagement with diverse standpoints. This approach requires an extension of our thinking beyond fixed structural categories to embrace the complexity of human identity.
It is argued that “even if women share a description of women’s oppression and an ideal of liberated society, they do not necessarily share the same analysis and thus the same theory of how that oppression works and how it should be resisted” (Herrmann and Abigail 53). Feminist movement is a movement that has been revisionist and self-critical throughout its evolutionary stages. The course of feminist theory has been profoundly altered with the interface of new knowledge and the unveiling of unexplored cultures.

According to bell hooks “Feminist willingness to change direction when needed has been a major source of strength and vitality in feminist struggle” (xiii). That internal critique is essential to any politics of transformation and feminism should embrace this with open arms. So far feminism, “has been sufficiently large, undogmatic and flexible to have accommodated many theoretical revisions and criticisms, and it has been enormously productive” (Warhol and Herndl 226).

Against influential strands of feminist theory it is argued that there is nothing essentialist or homogenising about the category ‘woman’. Contrary to many contemporary feminist theorists, it is contended that, although the category ‘woman’ does not reflect the whole reality of concrete and particular women, it nevertheless refers to something real, namely the structural position as woman, and this structural position is of marginality. Kresteva’s emphasis on marginality allows us to view this repression of the women in terms of “positionality rather than of essences” (Moi, 1989: 127). What is perceived as marginal at any given time depends on the position one occupies. And this position of marginality could be because of many factors apart from gender. The common factor that delineates the struggle of women in different cultures is on account of their position of marginality.

According to bell hooks, “a central problem within feminist discourse has been our inability to either arrive at a consensus of opinion about what feminism is or accept definitions that could serve as points of unification” (18). Biddy Martin is one of the several feminist critics who believe that it is possible and indeed necessary to retain the notion of a female subject; work that moves in the direction of historically specific analysis can reconceptualise the subject, power, knowledge without forfeiting a belief (if only strategic one), in a subjective agency, in the possibility of change, and the importance of (admittedly partial) narratives and representations of women’s lives.
We must, “Refuse to oppose equality to difference and insist continually on differences but not to abandon crucial terms of identity that enable us to act” (Scot 38). “If we have deconstructed the female out of existence it would seem that the very foundations of the feminist struggle have disappeared” (Moi 18). We need what Gayatri Spivak calls a ‘strategic essentialism’ to combat patriarchy.

The changing focus in feminist theorising has been insistence on broadening the scope and purview beyond the initial focus on male dominance. The result is a commitment towards more plural, inclusive and multifaceted explorations in feminism.

If we look into feminism in literature over the past two decades, it has evolved from ‘conscious raising’ to constructive transformation through representation of women in a better light within literary discourse. Earlier feminist literature was mapping and documenting the lives of women as stereotyped images of the patriarchal ideology and it attempted to expose the hypocrisy behind the constructed images of women in the so called canonical literature, gradually the focus shifted to interrogation and re-imagining of gender roles. These two features were common to feminist writings all over the world.

Women’s writing has moved through several evolutionary phases of subordination, protest and autonomy in relation to the literary mainstream; and across nationality by recurring images, metaphors, themes and plots that emerge from women’s social, psychic and literary experiences. Feminist writers are now able to communicate with the society that they represent with a lot more conviction. Feminist Theory in literature, according to Elaine Showalter, has three phases; the feminine, the feminist and the female which may start with imitation and the internalization of the established tradition but they move to responses of protest and demands for autonomy and then to a phase of self-discovery that breaks free from both acquiescence to and rebellion from the social norms. The first phase is the ‘feminist critique’ concerned with the feminist reader who is able to identify the negative,

A major concept in postcolonial theory was introduced by the Indian literary critic and theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. It refers to a strategy that nationalities, ethnic groups or minority groups can use to present themselves. While strong differences may exist between members of these groups, and amongst themselves they engage in continuous debates, it is sometimes advantageous for them to temporarily ‘essentialize’ themselves and bring forward their group identity in a simplified way to achieve certain goals.
stereotyped roles and delineation of women in literature. The second phase is concerned with woman as a writer, with woman as a producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres, and structures of literature by women. Its subjects include the psychodynamics of female creativity; linguistics and the problem of a female language; the trajectory of the individual or collective female literary career and literary history; and studies of particular writers and works. Since no term exists in English for such a specialised discourse, she has adapted the French term la gynocritique: “gynocritics” (Showalter 128: 1985). Gynocritics are women writers who attempt to examine the ways in which normative forms of sexuality are created, challenged and policed. Further the gynocritics attempt to give an alternate discourse from a woman’s point of view.

The third phase Showalter calls ‘gender theory’- which explores how the female writing is differentiated from the male writing tradition. She suggests four models that form the theoretical background of women writings namely the biological, the linguistic, the psychoanalytic and the cultural. The four models are sequential, subsuming and developing over the preceding models and hence interconnected in many ways.

In its essence feminist literature is essentially a voice of rebellion and social activism that opposes as well as exposes all forms of oppression and exploitation against women. Due to the trivialisation of women’s concerns by male writers, women took up the act of writing as gynocritics. Reflecting on the writings of women, Shashi Deshpande opines, “A woman who writes of women’s experiences often brings in some aspects of those experiences that have angered her, roused her strong feelings” (32).

Gynocriticism assumes that all writing is marked by gender, as Alicia Ostricker notes, “Writers necessarily articulate gendered experiences, just as they necessarily articulate the spirit of nationality, an age, a language” (9). It was observed by literary critics that women’s writing expressed a distinctive female consciousness, which was more discursive and conjunctive than its male counterpart. “Most feminist critics have rejected the concept of genderless imagination and have argued from a variety of perspectives that the imagination cannot escape from a socially, sexually and historically positioned self” (Showalter 1989: 347–69).
The feminist writers have to deal with an important issue, rather an impasse, regarding women’s writing involves the ability of fiction to say anything meaningful about women’s experience, given the fact that language is a construct of patriarchal culture. As a result the women writers are implicated in the system of patriarchal language. “This view is embraced especially by those critics influenced by French feminists; such as Cixous, Irigaray, and Monique Wittig; hold that male-dominated discourse, formulated in logical, rational, linear systems of thinking, is not adequate to express women’s experience. Instead the French feminists have urged women writers to ‘write the body,’ to get out of the narrow paths dictated by male-formulated discourse, through word play to create ‘new languages,’ and invented ‘écriture féminine’” (Payant 6).

Écriture féminine is a French feminist theory which analyses women’s writing style as different and marked by a female consciousness based on female sexual morphology. But its emphasis on the importance on a certain style of writing such as non-linear, confessional, fragmented, and experimental and avant garde again makes it prescriptive even for women writers who do not conform to this style. Their emphasis on the importance of female biological experience makes it dangerously close to sexist essentialism. Though alternatively, writing through the body may be “understood as being able to express itself, directly without any social mediation” as opposed to a prescriptive homogenising style as feared by feminist who do not subscribe to écriture feminism (Minh-ha 263).

Gynocriticism has proved instrumental in the progress of feminist analysis of texts which are central to the understanding of particular literary history and tradition. Gynocriticism thus is an effective politics of visibility to evoke a social response to feminism as a movement for transformation.

The case for comparative study of feminist literature cross culturally will help in furthering the solidarity of women across the globe. This comparative study aims to achieve an inclusionary understanding of the term feminism by juxtaposing points of view from various subject positions defined by race, class, age and sexuality. Feminism is continually and consistently committed to political change. This concern has continually recurred in changing form and is also evident in the narratives of the gynocritics all over the world. The authors selected for this study represent a broad
cultural spectrum and the study would foreground the need for theory to include and negotiate other issues related to feminism. Feminist fiction, like feminism itself, has diversified into a multiplicity of textual practices and political concerns. This research is a contribution to reinforcing diversity which will result in production of collaborative feminist knowledge across spaces and places.

A wide variety of interpretive tools would prove useful in reading a woman’s text. The methodology adopted for this research is in keeping with the spirit of feminist theory. It is somewhat ‘bricolage’ evolving and improvising with newer knowledge. The feminist theoreticians have tried to relate their theories to psychoanalysis, Marxism, liberalism, biological deterministic theories and anthropological theories also. In order to understand the gender point of view one has to accept the basic presuppositions and postulates that are taken for granted by feminism in general and its interaction with the other theories. At the same time, it cannot remain rigid with reference to other theories and claim universal validity and application. As a result every theory has to consider the possibility of transcendence of its own categories so as to reach the total complex of knowledge. So in the long run there is a totality of different theories acting and interacting with one and another yet maintaining their own identity. In the case of formulation of feminism various feminist theories across history would have their place in the network of criss-cross interrelationships that invoke newer and newer interpretations.

This project attempts to unveil certain inter textual relations between writers. The research also attempts to give an insight into the context in which these texts have their genesis. These texts are representatives of feminist interventions through gynocriticism. Women novelists across the world often suggest alternative versions produced by varying cultural locations and historical contexts. The study aims to explore the theoretical implications of these alternatives. According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty “an analysis of sexual difference in the form of a cross culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance leads to the construction of a similarly reductive notion of feminism’” (62). Broader perspective about feminism can evolve only if we examine the personal that is political, the politics of society as a whole and global revolutionary politics. Our analysis of women’s exploitation requires an exploration of all aspects of women’s political reality. Selected texts represent and endorse relationships that invite the reader to reconfigure and revise
traditional notions of family, filiations and affiliation in the society. In particular, alternative mode of thinking is highlighted in these narratives, promoting notions of revision and collective social transformation.

Among the literary genres, the novel is considered the most adequate form to represent the symbiotic links between individual and collective dimensions of identity. This research project is an analysis of women writers from the three continents: namely Africa, America and Indian subcontinent in order to bring into focus the potential ways of testing and expanding the theoretical debate within feminism. The chapter on American feminism engages with Carolyn Heilbrun’s *Death in a Tenured Position*, she wrote under the pseudonym of Amanda Cross. The chapter deals with stereotypical assumptions, gender identity and power inequality inherent in the academic power structures. The work has been analysed for its interventionist and constitutive potentials for the articulation of an alternative discourse of a gynocritic. Conflicting power grids within institutions of academies reflect a continuation of patriarchal mind set as depicted in the novel. A white affluent, woman may be marginalised on account of her gender; although she simultaneously occupies a privileged class position. It is further probed that by challenging traditional representations of women, Carolyn Heilbrun may be offering a reconstruction of existing social constructs. Using Foucault’s understanding of power as something exercised rather than possessed, the work would be analysed as an attempt to challenge the accounts of gender relation in order to comprehend the role of power in victimizing women and an attempt to transform it.

The first writer taken up for analysis from the Indian subcontinent is Bapsi Sidhwa. Her novel *Water* which is a novel based on the movie of the same name by Deepa Mehta has been analyzed. Bapsi Sidhwa is an award winning Pakistani novelist striving, above all, to bring women’s issues of the Indian subcontinent into public discussion. She is known for racy style, wit, narrative technique and thematic orientation. A widely acclaimed feminist novelist, she is one of the few women writers who bring theory into practice. Sidhwa emerges as a real voice of women of the Asian subcontinent who portrays women from a feminist perspective and endeavours to do full justice to her characters. She has made a conscious effort to change the image of women through her novels. No longer fatalist her women characters question the patriarchal social system and revolt against it. She has worked
in collaboration with film director Deepa Mehta. Deepa Mehta is an Indian-Canadian filmmaker known for her element trilogy of movies about sexuality, nationalism, and religion on the Indian subcontinent. The two, novelist and film maker, first collaborated on the adaptation of Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India* into a movie, ‘Earth’ released in 1998. ‘Water’ is the third film in Deepa Mehta’s trilogy; the novel based on the film is Bapsi Sidhwa’s fifth novel about the subcontinent.

*Water* is set in 1938, when India was still under the colonial rule of the British, and when the marriage of girl children to older men was commonplace. Following Hindu tradition, when a man died, his widow would be forced to spend the rest of her life in a widow’s ashram, an institution for widows to make amends for the sins from her previous life that supposedly caused her husband’s death. The narrative of this novel will be analysed by tracing the history of child marriage in India and the laws that governed the lives of women and especially widows. To study this text the *Dharmashastras* particularly the *Manu Samriti* that propounded the code of conduct for the society are analysed and the focus has been to show how this code of conduct was misquoted out of context by the patriarchal ideology to grind its own axe even later. The feministic deconstructive reading of *Dharmashastras* exposes the redundant archaic nature of certain traditions in the context of the novel which is written against the backdrop of pre independence era. The novel also explores a society still grappling with its religious history. The novel exposes the hypocrisy and double standards of Indian society in the 1930’s, especially where it concerns women, in particular unfortunate widows. The novel and the movie explore a dark, morbid side of human society. An Indian feminist epistemology based on the cultural ramifications has evolved through the analysis of this text. The doubly marginalized status of widows in India is studied through this text. A very brief comparative study of condition of widows in different parts of the world is also made so as to sort of bring about a cross connection regarding the marginal position of widows all over the world.

The second gynocritic that has been taken up from the Indian sub continent is Sarojini Sahoo. Her novel *The Dark Abode* has been studied to bring into focus the present feministic endeavours in writing. Sarojini Sahoo is a prime figure and trendsetter of feminism in contemporary Indian literature. She has emerged as a writer crusading for the cause of feminism through various experimentations in fiction. Her
stories and novels have become ‘no-holds-barred’ exploration into the ‘feminist self’ of a ‘female soul’. She delineates explicitly about the interior experiences of women and how their ‘burgeoning sexuality’ is seen as a threat to traditional patriarchal societies. This novel is avant garde fiction in the Indian context as it raises questions about issues that have never been discussed so far in any Indian discourse. Her feminism prioritizes the sexual politics of a woman over other issues. She identifies women’s sexual liberation as the real motive behind the women’s movement. Most conspicuous, perhaps, according to her is the area of women’s sexuality which has been left totally out of the purview of feminism in Indian context. In South Asian Outlook, an e-magazine published from Canada, MenkaWalia writes: “Sahoo typically evolves her stories around Indian women and sexuality, which is something not commonly written about, but is rather discouraged in a traditionalist society.” Sarojini’s novels and short stories probe culturally sensitive topics from Indian context. The celebrated writer believes that sexuality in literature grew with feminism and as a feminist; she discovered that for women sexual empowerment is as essential as financial independence.

The Dark Abode is a collage presentation of South Asian feminist novelist Sarojini Sahoo’s novel and American poet and painter Ed Baker’s 23 sketches, which deal with terrorism that people often face from micro to macro sphere. In her novel The Dark Abode, her intention has been to glorify the power and positive strength of women’s sexuality. Kuki, a Hindu married woman of India, tries to rectify Safiq, a Muslim Pakistani artist, to keep him from perversion and from becoming a sexual maniac.

The next chapter discusses feministic trajectories in African continent. The focus of this chapter is on how the African feminist agenda is unique because of the triple oppression of race, class and gender experienced by African women. African feminism is more inclusive and sensitive to varied problems associated with the lives of women; not merely about gender issues but also about other social relations. Racial discrimination, combined with economic deprivation is the major factor affecting the condition of women in Africa. The feminist movement in Africa has tended to prioritize race and class over gender. From the African continent Amma Darko’s Beyond the Horizon has been studied in detail to bring out the concerns of women in Africa and how their concerns are unique owing to their racial, historical contexts. In
Amma Darko’s representation of an African woman we have a character Mara who undergoes multiple levels of discrimination owing to her race, gender, economic condition and also her hyphenated immigrant status in another country. The novel upholds the struggle and will of Mara to live. Despite the painful, frustrating and humiliating experiences of prostitution and drug addiction written on her body, on her sexuality in particular, Mara keeps reclaiming and reconstructing her own private space, her own freedom and her financial independence. It depicts a challenging, controversial and subversive discourse on the sexuality of African women.

The concluding chapter of this research tries to establish cross connections between the works that were chosen for analysis.