Introduction
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The story of man and woman has been the centre of interest for philosophers, thinkers and writers of all the times. The spread of mankind and in fact of all other living organisms could not have been possible without these two opposite sexes. The Bible informs us that woman (Eve) was created from the ribs of man (Adam). This story of creation and subsequent procreation led philosophers and thinkers to an assumption of subordination of woman to the creation of man. In fact, this assumption in the subordination story was going to open up a world of debates about the relationship of man and woman and their respective roles in the making of the world. There came a time when this sign of subordination in the story of creation became a permanent structure in the writings of male writers and a conscious or unconscious stereotyped portrayal of women made its way in the European literature which later on was going to be a source of reference for those who will call this body of literature a structure of patriarchy. This patriarchal world view, however, was to be challenged as the female self or consciousness was yet to be explored and talked about by females themselves. That means females were yet to come on the stage to express what they would feel about themselves and the world around them.

It took female writers ages to evolve and grow to a degree when they could speak for themselves. The rise of industrialization in Europe was momentous as it propelled and provoked women to think of their economic role in the making of their families. Besides, it pinched their consciousness to an extent that they started thinking in terms of their
due rights in the largely male dominated society. They were a periphery in the male dominated setup and they wanted to move to the centre and thus stand side by side with the man in the performance of different socio-economic and political roles in the making of their families and nation. In fact, women started questioning the different constructs that man had developed about her and this questioning of these constructs led to the formation of a radical movement that aimed at challenging the patriarchal world view. Role reversal was sought and demolition of male-female binary opposition was looked forward to.

The seeds of this rebellion and revolution were sown by a number of writers. Mary Wollstonecroft philosophized the rights of women and their place and position in the western society in her *A Vindication of Rights of Women* (1792). She in fact, has discussed male writers like Milton, Pope and Rousseau in order to prove how these great patriarchs would portray and depict the image of woman in the over all scheme of the male dominated society. Similarly, Olive Schreiner wrote *Women and Labour* to show the economic position of women in the western society. The unequal treatment given to women seeking education and alternatives to marriage and motherhood was fully well discussed and examined by Virginia Woolf in her *A Room of One’s Own*.

The arrival of such works on the horizon of literature and literary criticism was a harbinger of change as far as the evolution of female consciousness was concerned. Such works were definitely going to shape the consciousness of coming generations in the western society and ‘consciousness’ was now going to have it female identity in the metaphysics of the western world. This change was realized and recognized by some male writers also. Contributions for the
development of this movement started flowing from male writers as well. John Stuart Mill produced *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and *Origin of the Family* (1884) came from the pen of Freidreik Engels. Feminist movement thus started to impress one and all.

Feminism emerged as a political movement for the assertion of women’s rights and this movement gave central stage to female consciousness that had been suppressed and treated as an ‘other’ by the different culture constructions of the male dominated world. In 1970s, major efforts were made to expose the mechanisms of patriarchy, that is, the cultural mindset in men and women which perpetrated sexual inequality. The whole body of literature, political, social, religious and literary, was reviewed to see the typical images of women. Such efforts concretized the fears of women and so provided a philosophical base and data for the emergence of a movement called feminism. Obviously, such a criticism was polemical and combative in nature. In the 1980s, however, the mood changed. Eclecticism came into feminist criticism as the proponents of this thought began to utilize the theoretical insights from Marxism, Structuralism, Linguistics, and so on. Focus of attention shifted from attacking male versions of the world to exploring the nature of the female world and outlook, and reconstructing the lost and suppressed records of female experience. This development in the feminist consciousness resulted in the emergence of the need to construct a new canon of women’s writing by rewriting the history of novel and poetry in such way that neglected women writers were given new prominence.

The present thesis is an attempt to explore and examine the rise of female writing in the backdrop of modern British theatre which was hardly ever the centre of female performance. Though they wrote
novels and poetry in the nineteenth century the British theatre had not been stormed by female writers and actresses as yet. Feminist tradition, as this thesis aims at finding, scaled new heights when women writers took the stage and demonstrated the aspirations of female consciousness before the audiences. Female playwrights like Dodie Smith, Gertrude Jennings and G.B. Stern took to the stage to strengthen and reinforce the battle of ideas that the proponents of feminism had started in Europe. The plays of these three writers caught my attention due to the virginity of the area and the path being untrodden so far. Besides, since the trio could not voice extremist feminism and made efforts to hold the balancing point between patriarchy and matriarchy, they have not been much heeded in the critical discourse of feminist literature, it attracted the attention of this scholar to explore and analyze the issues and concerns in their work. The present thesis has tried to explore the different thematic vistas of these three writers in such a way that feminism as a movement for the rights of women seems to be supplementing the thought process through out the course of these writings.

The chapter first of the present work entitled ‘Image of Women in European Drama and her Position Thereof” attempts at finding the image of woman in European literature. In this chapter, great writers like Aristotle and William Shakespeare have been touched upon as frame of reference for seeing the stereotyped image of woman in the western literature.

In chapter second of the present work, entitled ‘Modern British Women Playwrights: A Brief Survey’, a brief survey of modern British women playwrights has been given to facilitate a background for the
study of their thematic concerns that have been taken up for analysis one by one in the forthcoming chapters.

The thematic concerns in the select plays of Dodie Smith have been taken up for analysis and examination in the chapter third of the study entitled as ‘Balancing Act of Women in the Select Plays of Dodie Smith’. In this chapter, an attempt has been made to see how Dodie Smith strikes a balance between the patriarchal view of woman and that of feminist world view. Similarly, in the fourth chapter of this study, ‘Birth of New Woman in G.B. Stern’s The Man Who Pays the Piper and The Matriarch’. The image of New Woman as the protagonist on the modern stage has been traced with reference to her plays like The Man Who Pays the Piper and The Matriarch. Finally, the chapter fifth of the present work, ‘Theme of Matriarchy in Gertrude Jennings’ Family Affairs’, has tried to picturise the theme of matriarchy in Family Affairs of Gertrude Jennings’.

Since the subject mentioned playwrights have drawn lesser attention from the scholars of English literature and criticism and the area is still unexplored, the present research work aims at analyzing the thematic concerns in the writings of these playwrights from the feminist point of view. There has been some surface level work on these women playwrights by a great scholar of English literature namely Maggie B. Gale. However, she herself in one of her emails to this scholar admits that she has only made a beginning and things are yet to be explored in this area. Inspired by the pioneering insights of Maggie B. Gale, the present scholar has taken up the challenge to contribute something more in the field.

It would be pertinent to record that Maggie B. Gale has done the work of a pioneer in this field. Her West End Women: Women and the
London Stage 1918-1962 (1996) is a historical account of modern British theatre and the rise of New Woman in the modern world. The book does not just talk about feminism; it rather gives a detailed account of the different socio-economic and political realities that confronted the modern woman. The present thesis owes its growth and development to the foundations laid by Maggie B. Gale in this book.

Thus, the present thesis hopes to demonstrate how the fragmented self of modern woman managed to assert itself against the male dominated constructs of the western metaphysics and literature with reference to different socio-economic and political realities of the modern and post-modern Europe. That means the thesis would be eclectic in its analysis and examination as the nature and the scope of the topic not only demands so but it also promises new perspectives that future scholars of the present area would be taking up with these insights in mind.