Chapter - I

Recentring Woman : An Introduction

‘Recentring woman’ is a modern concept in feminist literary criticism. It originated as an offshoot of feminist scholarship that received impetus from the women’s movement of the late 1960s and 70s. It aims at attaining the dual objective of deconstructing predominantly male cultural paradigms and reconstructing a female perspective and experience in order to change the tradition that has marginalized and silenced women in various spheres. It holds that the inequality of sexes is a cultural construct; it is not a divine mandate and the male perspective assumed to be universal has overshadowed all spheres of knowledge and shaped their paradigms and methods. It is concerned with revising concepts previously thought of as universal but now seen as originating in a particular culture. It aims at restoring a female perspective by extending knowledge about women’s experience and their invaluable contribution to culture. “The biological differences between a man and a woman have no determinate meaning in themselves but have been invested with various symbolic meanings by different cultures. Feminist scholars study these diverse social constructs of femaleness and maleness in order to understand and challenge the universal phenomenon of male dominance” (Showalter, New Feminist Criticism 02). Through this project, an effort has been made to compare and contrast how the three poets under study have exposed the ‘feminine mystique’, hollowness of the constructs fostered by patriarchy and how women have grappled with various patriarchal structures over the years. These constructs originate in a particular culture and marginalize and devalue these invaluable human resources despite their unparalleled contribution to the growth of humanity.

The feminist movement includes any form of opposition to any type of social, personal or economic discrimination that women face because of their gender. The desire for equality with men on the social and political fronts took the form of an organized movement in the West. It includes both the struggle for women’s equal rights as well as aspirations for an all-round liberation of women, which is considered as emancipation. Simone de Beauvoir holds that, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman... it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature” (295). Feminist scholarship both originates and participates in larger efforts of feminism to liberate women from the structures that have marginalized them; and as such it seeks not only to reinterpret but to reform and change the whole world.
The social construction of gender takes place through the working of ideology. Ideology is a system of beliefs and assumptions, unexamined, invisible which represent the imaginary relationships of individuals with their real conditions of existence. Though it originates in a particular cultural set up, it presents ‘woman’ not only as a cultural construct but also as a living, sensitive entity. Thus, the women, who happen to bear children, should be more responsible for rearing them than the men who father them, is presented as ‘the way things naturally are, though it is not the reality’! In fact, the oppression of women is both a material reality originating in material conditions and a psychological phenomenon, the way women and men perceive one another and themselves because of their social conditioning. There is an urgent need to change this perception – the very attitude towards women for a blissful society of peace and harmony.

Literary Feminism is primarily a female-centric literary programme that aims at de-recognition of the linear absolutes of male history. Feminist literature has sought to deconstruct social “myths” about women (perpetuated by the normative male canon) and deconstruct suppressed female narratives. Male writers have often traditionally devalued women characters and presented them in a poor light. They have portrayed them as innately weak and subservient in order to serve their own interests. Female writing seeks to liberate the nuanced and complex notion of “womanhood” from the stereotypical representation of women in male-centric writings. Hence, the notion of a “retrieval” of female subjectivity is at the core of all feminist literature. Some of the most defining theoretical concepts of literary feminism were propounded by Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva etc.

Gilbert, Guber and Showalter hold that women writers react in a collective manner to common social realities and discriminations. Therefore, there is a recurrence of similar topics, themes, images and metaphors in the writings of women. They assert that experiences of life are translated into literature. Women’s alienation from literary canon is basically due to the fact that male authors display chiefly their own views of life which are not necessarily woman’s experiences. When literature is seen as a mirror of life, what is belittled or pushed aside becomes the role of the language. Feminist critics have realized that numerous social restrictions have robbed women of their immense potential in art and literature. They have validated women’s perceptions by restoring their writings
to public domain. They have done a great service to humanity in general and women writers in particular by providing their works a kind of visibility and authority hitherto accorded to men’s literature only. Thus, the concept of ‘Recentring Woman’ is based on this notion of retrieval of women’s views and writings.

The construction of gender is grounded in male attempts to control female sexuality and perpetuate male domination. This is exhibited in the dichotomization of masculine and feminine in terms of such polarities as ‘culture and nature’; ‘truth and duplicity’; ‘reason and passion’; ‘day and night’ the term associated with the female requiring control by the superior male. Interestingly, such polarities have got deeply embedded in our social fabric, in our hearts and minds. The meaning of gender in patriarchal ideology is ‘not simply differences but... division, oppression, inequality, internalized inferiority for women’. Interestingly, patriarchal control was developed and institutionalized throughout history by using various agencies, ideologies, social practices and institutions. Therefore, it appears to be a natural process as it has achieved the complete subordination of women.

Patriarchy is the most powerful social, cultural and political institution which came into existence with the men taking over the means of production. (Rao 83). All democratic countries have been aspiring to attain equality among their citizens. But in reality, in no democratic country, women have had equal rights with men. Women are represented as gifts and commodities which men exchange between them. Like the princesses in Dinsen’s story, they are always gifts, not the givers. They have no significant power or influence with a system which is controlled by men and works to their benefit. The complex, ambivalent relation of women to the patriarchy is suggested by Dinsen’s tale which concerns two types of communities of women – those that serve the dominant culture and those who oppose and subvert it. ‘Storytellers’ in western cultures, however, often legitimize the dominant culture and functions as part of a literary tradition that inscribes the dominant ideology and marginalizes women.

History too has been an account of male experience, written by men, from a male perspective for their own benefit. It has been written primarily from the perspective of the authoritative male with a view to justify the values of patriarchy dominant in the West. This project aims at exposing the pernicious effects of male dominance whose andocentric framework has excluded from its ambit not only women but the poor, the anonymous and the illiterate. Women historians have
realized the ruinous effects of such wrong representation of women and assert the need for a ‘woman-centered’ analysis of the past suggesting that women’s empowerment is possible only when they are represented in the correct perspective. This reminds us of John Stuart Mill’s observation, “We may safely assert that the knowledge that men can acquire of women, even as they have been and are, without reference to what they might be, is wretchedly imperfect and superficial and will always be so until women themselves have told all they have to tell” (qtd. in Tandon 35).

Women historians assert the need for a woman centered analysis of the past suggesting that women’s social reality and experiences are different from those of men. Some feminist critics plead for revisionary readings of literary canons while others direct their attention to the recovery of ignored women writers. These correspond to the dual focus of feminists’ efforts of revising and challenging the traditional male paradigms and reconstructing the female perspectives.

In fact, feminist criticism has two basic premises - first ‘woman’ presented in literature by male writers from their own viewpoint known as phallocentricism and secondly, ‘woman’ presented in the writings of female writers from their point of view leading to gynocriticism. Showalter terms the focus on women writers as gynocritics as she describes the history of styles, themes, genres and structures of writing by women. Showalter asserts that “in its earlier phase, feminist criticism concentrated on exposing the misogyny of literary practice: the stereotyped images of women in literature, abuse or textual harassment of women in classic and popular male literature and the exclusion of women from literary history” (Showalter, 1985:5). Her gynocriticism is a necessary step in redressing these imbalances of the male-dominant tradition.

Feminism as a self-conscious political movement originated in the West in the late eighteenth century with Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) which is regarded as the manifesto of modern feminism. It is the constant analysis of the damage done to women and therefore, to society by conditioning them into inferior social roles. It was followed by John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* (1869) which propounded that economic independence was necessary for the dignity of women. The feminist movement mainly arose in order to achieve social, economic and political rights equal to those of men. Broadly, the movement involves, as Barbara
Berg defines, “numerous phases of women’s emancipation” and the efforts made to eradicate the concept of gender construction which is man-made (Tandon 26). Feminist writers refuse to accept the ‘images of women’ portrayed by male writers as they lack authenticity as women have not experienced their own experiences. They uncover the forces of oppression that circumscribe the life and possibilities of a woman. Women have been hapless victims of mental and psychological colonization and led into silence, euphemism or even circumlocution. The feminist writers aim at defining and retrieving new horizons of dignified and fruitful existence to women. They try to thwart the powerful play of gender equations that always relegate women to the margin and vacuum. They suggest that social and cultural contexts of a work of art should be taken into account in order to understand it in its proper perspective.

The women were deprived of not only education and financial independence, but they have also fought a long battle against male ideology which virtually silenced them into obedience and subservience. In order to perpetuate the gender ideologies, male writers have often depicted women, as ‘obedient daughters’, ‘modest wives’, ‘motherly figures’ etc who are inevitably ‘self-sacrificing’.

It is only in the twentieth century that women began to assert their political rights and a number of major feminist literary figures questioned the historical representation of women by male authors. They attempted to provide alternative histories of women as opposed to the traditional ones written by men. They have tried to deconstruct several age old binaries and gender politics which were dominant in philosophical and political thinking. Their main concern was the rewriting of a literary tradition from a female point of view to bring them to the centre and restore their honourable position in society, which they so richly deserve.

Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill, the two pioneers of western feminism held that women must be educated properly to realize their potential. They argued that society as a whole would benefit if the talents of women were cultivated rather than being totally wasted. They did not accept any argument to prove that women were naturally inferior in intellect or originality to men and believed that women’s disabilities were maintained in order to perpetuate their subordination in domestic life because the male sex cannot tolerate the idea of living with equality. And the worst of it was that it was practised with the alleged good of the victim in mind!
Wollstonecraft held that under the pressure of patriarchy women themselves contributed to their subservience and downfall by assuming that pleasing men was their primary duty. They assume a secondary status and corrupt themselves. She dreamt of a society where labour and power were evenly distributed. She observes that human beings must have certain independence and self esteem if they were to live a life worthy of humans. Interestingly, their feminine virtues have been glorified just to exploit them which render them crippled, weak and subservient. In the words of Wollstonecraft: “Gentleness, docility, and spaniel like affection are consistently recommended as their cardinal virtues...She was created to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever he chooses to be amused” (38). These qualities are instilled in women right from birth as a part of their socialization. J.S. Mill rightly echoes similar views: “All women are brought up from the very early years with the notion that their ideal of character is just opposite to that of men...All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women to live for others and make self-abnegation of themselves and to have no life but in their affection” (232). They are not even encouraged to pursue their natural interests. Their creative instincts are belittled and ignored. They are thought to be more suitable for the household drudgery. Mill speculates on the ruinous effects of this biased socialization and comments in the book *The Subjection of Women*, “The principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other is wrong in itself and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on one side, nor disability on the other.” (219)

Simone de Beauvoir (1908-86) in her monumental work *The Second Sex* makes an implicit call to women to assert their autonomy in defining themselves against men. Like Wollstonecraft and Mill, she held that femininity is a social construct, a result of various societal forces. As the values are created/constructed by men, not by women, they use religion also to motivate the latter to accept their subordination. Beauvoir argues, “Men fundamentally oppress women by characterizing them at every level, as the ‘other’, defined exclusively in opposition to men. He extends into the world to impose his will on the world whereas the woman is doomed to immanence or inwardness. He creates, acts, invents; she waits for him to save her” (318). From the very beginning, women are conditioned to be capricious, frivolous, pallid figures
compared with great men. Everything helps to confirm this hierarchy in her mind. The historical and literary culture to which she belongs, the songs and legends… Children’s books, mythologies all reflect the myths born of the pride and desires of men….it is through the eyes of men that the little girl discovers the world and reads therein her destiny. (316)

Beauvoir reiterates that this secondary position is not imposed by natural feminine characteristics but rather by strong environmental forces of social traditions and education that have been under the control of men. Recognizing the need to give women their due place in society, she believes that the feminists have to fight social and historical facts to prove the history’s partiality towards women. She explains that women’s reproductive system happens to be a great handicap in their way of taking control over the material world. Because of their vulnerable state of bearing children, they had to be dependent on males for their sustenance and protection. Her reproductive functions were reconcilable with the household works and thus, they were left imprisoned in the unending household chores which deprived them of enlightenment of the world outside their homes. She argues that idealizing of feminine virtues is often a ploy to imprison women in their difference. She does not recognize that those virtues are not in themselves bad. She feels ‘femininity’ cannot be discarded; rather it has to be incorporated in a fuller kind of humanity. Woman’s tragedy throughout history is that she has been denied the right to aspiration—denied full humanity. Amazingly, women themselves have colluded in perpetuating their alienation from themselves. As long as she clings to her femininity, she is denying her human possibilities.

Elaine Showalter (b.1941), founder of feminist criticism in the United States, developed the concept of ‘gynocriticism’ in her essay “Towards a Feministic Poetics” which analyzes different literary works written by women and their themes, genres, styles, structures and the psycho-dynamics of female creativity throughout history. She launched the search for ‘gynocriticism’ which would look at the history, styles, themes, genres and structures of writings by women. In her seminal work, A Literature of their Own (1977), she has analyzed how the women writers were kept out of the literary canon during the 19th Century. Their texts were rejected as limited in range, superfluous and trivial. In order to trace/identify the evolution of a female literary tradition, she identifies three phases of women’s writings — a feminine
phase (1840-80) where women writers imitate male models; a feminist phase (1880-1920) during which women writers challenged those models and their values; and the female phase (1920-present) in which women writers advocate their own personal perspectives and views. She attacks traditional literary history that reduces female writers to only a few who are “accepted”. She describes a women’s tradition in literature that is an imaginative continuum…[of] certain patterns, themes problems and images from generation to generation”. (Literature 11) She replaces traditional literary periods with these three stages in women’s literary history, which mark their growth in consciousness as ‘feminine’, ‘feminist’ and ‘female’.

First of all, there was a prolonged phase of imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition and internalization of its standards of art and its views of social roles. Then was the phase of resentment and opposition against the standards and values, and advocacy of minority rights and values, including a demand for autonomy. And finally, there is a phase of self-exploration, a turning inward for freedom from the dependency of opposition, a search for identity. (Literature 13). In her feminist writings, she has stressed the relationship between women’s writing and women’s culture. She divides feminist criticism into two distinct varieties.

The first is feminist critique concerned with woman as reader – woman as the consumer of male-produced literature. Its main concerns are the images, numerous myths and stereotypes of women in literature, omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism and the fissures in male-constructed literary history.

Then, there is gynocritics which is concerned with woman as writer - with woman as the producer of literature. Though the feminist critique is essentially political and polemical, gynocritics is more self-contained and experimental.

She also brought out the ways in which women’s writings had been hampered by social expectations. From the very beginning, the American women writers had to grapple with expectations that their role should be private rather than public and their writings should be about domestic ‘womanly’ subjects.

Kate Millet (b.1934) also took up the issue of female sexuality and women’s representation in literature. She uses the concept of patriarchy to provide a theoretical examination of women’s oppression in her book Sexual Politics (1969). She considers patriarchy as a political institution which depends on subordinated roles for women and distinguishes between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ as the former is rooted in biology while the
latter is a culturally acquired term. It manifests itself through social institutions and wields its influence on individuals through the existing ideologies. It hands over the reigns of power to men who ensure the relationship of domination and subordination between the two sexes. Kate Millet observes that “the military, industry, technology, universities, science, political office and finance — in short, every avenue of power within the society….is entirely in male hands”(25). Patriarchy always intersects with an individual’s caste, class, race, religion and culture. Here the perpetrators of violence against women may be individual men, the existing caste system, pre-dominant beliefs, customs and traditions of the community, the class divisions in society or even women. The Western feminism has generally associated power with phallocentricism by considering patriarchy to be the main system that causes the victimization of women.

Betty Friedan through *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) analyzes the problems and grievances of American middle class women and their entrapment within the private domestic sphere that is largely responsible for their inability to pursue public careers. She criticizes them for adopting the role of a wife and mother as a full-time career (30). In her opinion, medical experts like doctors, gynecologists, obstetricians, counsellors etc convince women to attain self-fulfillment by acquiring competent home making skills (132-59). This false sense of contentment dissipates their energies and leaves them bored and stressed out. She believes that the housewife’s excessive love for children is detrimental and ruinous to their growth and independent adulthood (250).

However, she argues that the role of a ‘wife’ and ‘mother’ is a sign of woman’s normalcy and signifies the fulfillment of moral obligation (297). According to her, patriarchy is more responsible for the oppression of women than capitalism and to do so, it uses all the trappings like monogamy, marriage, child rearing, domestication etc. She terms all these as the agents of patriarchy to attain its objectives. She states that women can manage marriage, motherhood, and career only if both the sexes demand a change in the public values and institutional structures. She demands equal job opportunities, equal wages but more flexible schedule as she needs to fulfil her domestic obligations (69). The figure of mother is simultaneously a reality, an archetype and a historical construct fostered by patriarchy. In a patriarchal setup, man controls not only production but also reproduction and a mystique is purposefully created around maternal function of a woman. This mystique exploits her throughout her life. She lives through her body and regards child bearing an honourable task entrusted to her, “the pinnacle of
human achievement” (126). This kind of exploitative conditioning is the result of maternal mystique. This pseudo “glorification of female sexual function” (126) is a patriarchal strategy to perpetuate female subordination and maintain phallocentric domination of society. “She feels it is really unfortunate that a woman feels exploited and tortured in the oppressive atmosphere of her own home. She is not able to develop her abilities or potential. Our culture does not permit women to accept or gratify their basic need to grow and fulfil their potentialities as human beings, a need which is not solely defined by their sexual role.” (Tandon 95)

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) in her essay, A Room of One’s Own (1929) raised issues like the social and economic context of women’s writings and advocated financial and psychological independence for women so that they could exercise their creative powers/ability freely. In her opinion, the subjugation of woman is a key fact of history. She feels that the western civilization has emphasized the rational faculties that are considered to be only masculine in nature. Thus, feminine identity finds no place, but the one with relation to man. She is excluded from society and is taken as a non-rational being. Woolf calls it barbarism which prevails in every aspect of modern life. It takes many forms — paternal tyranny at home, male supremacy in the state and intellectual rigidity in the mind. She feels that men and women are misrepresented in literature and gender differences are constructed and not essential. She holds that writing is basically a product of historical circumstances. She presents the idea of a harmonious mind and feels that women alone can save men from their lust of war and killing and save the society from annihilation. She discusses the basic characteristics of feminine experience and observes that purely masculine and purely feminine is dangerous. Feminine and masculine, intuitive and rational are to be blended and synthesized to create harmony and make the personality balanced and complete.

Patriarchy as a system has been ruling almost the whole world for more than five thousand years. The subjugation of women has been so all pervasive that it is hardly noticed as something unnatural. Del Martin, a noted feminist, provides an overview of the cruelty directed at women or wives in particular. She maintains that for centuries husbands have tortured and killed disobedient wives with the support of the State or the church. Physical violence in the name of chastisement was legal in the US. She aptly comments in Battered Wives, “The historical roots of our patriarchal family models are ancient and deep… New norms for marriage and family must be
created since the battering of wives grows naturally out of ancient and time-honoured traditions”. (qtd. Tandon 145)

**Feminism in Indian Landscape**

In spite of the early influence of Mary Wollstonecraft, feminism as a social movement was slower to start in India than in the West. The battle for legal rights was an important aspect of the early feminist movement. Without a legal identity of her own, it was difficult for an ill-treated or deserted wife to lead a normal life. Moreover, within marriage, she had no rights over her own persona, her own property, her earnings and even her own children (Tandon 38). The efforts of Indian feminist activists like Madhu Kishwar, Uma Chakravarty, Vrinda Nabar etc have made an immense contribution to the promotion of feminist causes in contemporary times. Unlike western countries, feminism in India has been based on the ground realities. It has helped free women from the age-old patriarchal and religious traditions which sap their strength. Its pragmatic and result-oriented endeavours like spread of education, economic self-sufficiency, preservation of the rights of women and particularly creating awareness for liberation from conservative super structures which suppress them socially, economically as well as psychologically, have been commendable. Although Indian literary feminism especially as evidenced in women’s writing in English, is a vital, living tradition traceable in poetry to Toru Dutt in the nineteenth century colonial India, in novel writing to Attia Hossein, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal and Shashi Deshpande etc in the modern times. However, no significant woman poet is identifiable until Kamala Das (1934-2009) emerged on the scene with her fiercely feministic and iconoclastic poetry.

Indian feminists are more humanists than the feminists of the West. Indian feminism does not particularly talk of equality and rights of women, it is more about compassion, respect and understanding from the male counterparts. Indian society has always been highly hierarchical and therefore, the concept of equality as a correlate to the concept of individual freedom is alien to the society. Reflecting on the nature of Indian Feminism Chaudhury Maitrayee comments, “In India, feminism and nationalism are closely interlinked. Feminism in India has none of the male-female antagonism characteristic of woman’s movement in the West” (Maitrayee :xxi). The most distinctive feature is that it was initiated by men not women. Hence, it did not acquire the aggression of gender warfare as it did in the West.
The concept of Indian feminism is rooted in the efforts characterized by peace, non-violence and harmonious co-existence. Kavita A. Sharma in her essay ‘Exploring the Icons: Sita and Radha’ comments, “(In India) to become feminine has a spiritual meaning. A male is aggressive. A woman… receives, accepts and absorbs. That is why, all religions emphasize virtues that are characteristically and traditionally feminine. Mahavira would say *ahimsa*, Buddha *compassion*, Christ *love*” (Padia 106). Women often appear to lag behind because their strength is inner life, self-containment and contentment. But the society pays very heavily for the restlessness, disturbance and obsession of men. If a man has to explore the world within, he has to take the inward journey and develop the woman within. The female is the basis and origin of human life which provides all nourishment and nurturing. It is sturdier than the male and has characteristics necessary for peace and harmony in the world.

Unlike the West, Indian women’s organizations have received a lot of support from men. There have been no instances of political attacks on account of feminist politics. They did not want any preferential treatment in their crusade. They did not want to acknowledge that they have been repressed and accept their inferiority. The Indian society differs from that of the West in the sense that it is a service-oriented or a duty-oriented society. The sense of duty and service are ingrained deeply in our culture. The duty-oriented society manages itself not by fighting for the rights but by excelling in performing the duties. If fathers, sons, brothers and husbands perform their duties, mothers, daughters, sisters and wives follow suit, the question of oppression of women will not arise at all. Stressing on the need for Indian Feminism, Avadhesh Kumar Singh observes:

There is a need for empowering women in India to reach the same levels as the role models from history. Unfortunately, the leaders of women’s movement in the country have simply tried to use western feminism in the Indian situation. What we really need is a homegrown feminism — call it *Kali-ism* if you wish to be radical and extremist or simply *nari-ism*. But it must take into account our conditions, ideas, historical developments. (qtd. in Padia 56)

Though the liberation of women is a concept that gathered steam in the later half of the twentieth century, India has a much earlier history and tradition of intellectually emancipated women during the Vedic period. There were Vedic women like Ghosha, Lopamudra, Maitrayee and others, who were free to pursue scholarly
studies. This glorious Vedic tradition of equality was lost later with the codification of laws by Manu whose ideas put the seal of male domination and tyranny over women and their socially sanctioned oppression.

Thus, the present concept of women's liberation is not a new one to an Indian who is familiar with ancient Indian history and tradition. The efforts to achieve woman's emancipation, can be seen as the effort of the Indian women to regain their glorious Vedic tradition of equality with men. Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay sums up in her article 'The Status of Women in India’ in the book Women in Modern India, “This movement (Indian Feminism) cannot, in any sense, be said to be a rebellion or a revolt against man; it is rather an attempt to regain lost ground. It is not actuated by any spirit of competition nor marked by violence, it is a movement of calm assertion.” (05)

Though in western countries feminists emphasize a separatist culture that avoids the influence of men, in India feminist position does not include any negation of man. The Indian feminism proposes proactive, inclusive, constructive speculation based on principles of equality and harmony. It questions women’s oppression, considers various options for women’s emancipation and even puts to rest certain doubts that may arise in our minds. A well-known Hindi novelist Surendra Verma aptly sums up the essence of Indian feminism:

Woman’s equality means rejection of man’s dominance not of man as such. The relationship between men and women and women and men is the fountainhead of the bliss of love…. The project of women’s emancipation does not envisage life insulated from men. It is a concept of life being enriched by mutual dialogue. (qtd in Padia 71)

Indian feminism has dissociated from western trends because of religious and cultural factors. Unlike our western counterpart, marriage and family are very central to Indian life. The political fact of India having been a colony that necessitated a common fight on part of both men and women for their rights is an ample evidence that women have contributed immensely during the days of freedom struggle. Even in the pre-independence period, the Indian woman possessed a moral sense was an independent and thinking individual.

Indian feminists have repeatedly tried to negotiate the unease and countered the attacks of being western in their approach. Like Indian culture, their efforts have been peaceful and all-embracing. It has been without any coercion, internal
differences and supportive to the cause of nationalism. These lines from Sarojini Naidu’s Presidential address at the All India Women’s Congress in Bombay in 1930 reveal the spirit of Indian feminism:

We are not weak, timid, meek women. We hold the courageous Savitri as our ideal, we know how Sita defied those who entertained those suspicious of her ability to keep her chastity. We possess the spirit of creative energy to legislate for the morale of the world... We must have no mutual conflict in our homes or abroad.... We must transcend differences... rise above nationalism, above religion, above sex. (qtd. in Chaudhuri ‘Introduction’ xx)

In India, woman had a respectable position in the past. Her unique contribution to humanity has been eulogized in the hymns of the Vedas and numerous works of Sanskrit Literature. The ideals of Sita, Damyanti, Savitri etc. have inspired the generations of epic poets. The wife addressed as ‘patni’, ‘grahpatni’, ‘sahdharmini’ shared privileges of an authority with her husband and was considered ‘an embodiment of purity’, as also a ‘source of invisible strength’. In Mahabharata, Draupadi not only dwarfed the mighty Pandavas, but also persuaded them on to that war in which the insult meted out to her was wiped out with the blood of the haughty oppressors. Displaying her strength of steel nerves, an exemplary devotion, she fell dead before their eyes. Our scriptures are dotted with numerous examples wherein women, who are called ‘human beings with tender hearts and lesser muscular strength’, have acted as beacon lights, embodiment of perseverance, infinite courage and fortitude. This glorious history is unique about Indian womanhood and forms the basis of Indian feminism.

The Indian concept of ardhnariswar with nari (woman) and nar (man), Shiva and Shakti, Purush and Prakrati merged in one is unique in itself and reveals the essence of Indian feminism. Here nari is life force and nar is latent. Shiva is a shava (a corpse) without the life force in it (Padia74). Thus, in Indian religious tradition, a woman was basically visualized as shakti - an embodiment of mercy and fierceness, immensely compassionate at heart and ruthlessly cruel from outside. The acceptance of this image, however, didn’t last long. The society highlighted the merciful and compassionate aspect but not the one of self-reliant one. With the passage of time, she was consigned to the rut of tradition, under the umbrella of dharma to sustain order and maintain a strong social structure.
The nineteenth century renaissance generated a sustained effort to retrieve women and the masses from their trampled position. The social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who struggled for the abolition of Sati, Iswar Chandra Vidya Sagar, Keshav Chandra Sen, and a host of others worked for reforms to put an end to the practices of child marriage, ill treatment of widows and ban on widow re-marriage. Ancient scriptures were analyzed by the humanists of the new era. M.K.Gandhi, leader of the National Freedom Movement, gave an impetus to his ideal of 'stree-shakti' when he called upon all Indian women to come out of the confines of their homes and contribute to the freedom struggle.

However, the concept of liberation for women from their traditional restraints in society is yet to percolate to the women of the lower strata of society even in the 21st century. Although religion has dominated the lives of Indian women, no religion has accorded them their rightful place. Amazingly, it has been used as a tool to suppress and subjugate them. A pious Hindu woman feeds her husband and children with dainties and satisfies herself with leftovers. In Islam, Mohammad treated them as human beings of the second order. The abominable custom of purdah has turned them into saleable commodities with no rights in respect of marriage, succession and guardianship. Christianity has also condemned women as inferior beings with Eve having been created from the rib of Adam. Buddhism has not only advocated that woman should be empowered but has also provided the opportunities for her self-realization. Jainism has treated woman as a pathetic creature full of erroneous behaviour who cannot even desire for salvation because of constant untruthfulness and inherent impurities.

The process of socialization is at the root of this detrimental conditioning of women considering themselves inferior and weak. A girl is inculcated from birth the ideas of sacrifice, pride in patience, and of the need to accept a lower status in life. The parents and teachers emphasize the ‘feminine’ values of obedience, patience and humility. Surprisingly, all these centuries, women have served as magnifying glasses possessing the magic power of reflecting the image of man at twice its normal size. They have striven for their (men’s) enhancement and their own effacement. This belief is also endorsed by myths, popular stories, and epics like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. There are certain duties allotted through these roles. Only by performing her duties sincerely can a woman attain the exalted position of a pativrata or the ideal wife. Thus, the process of value-internationalization begins at birth and
moulds the self-perceptions and attitudes of women. PREM, an NGO operating in Orissa for uplift of the downtrodden reveals the point:

Subservience to her husband and family is purposefully instilled in a woman. If she wants this cocoon-like existence - serving her husband and sons - she will have to accept injustice. From childhood, a woman is taught to act like a martyr to give up her desires and expectations. This samarpan (total dedication) is exalted as a virtue in women. (27)

According to a UN Human Development Report “The status of women in India is undergoing a sea change after a long hiatus of subjection or discrimination. Women, in fact, constitute half of the world’s population and work two-thirds of the world’s working hours but surprisingly, she earns only one-tenth of the world’s income” (1995 online). As per the 2011 Census in India, sex ratio among children has gone shockingly low. This shows that boys continue to be preferred and daughters remain unwanted. Malnutrition of women is a harsh reality of the entire Third World which has been well-documented. Meera Kosambi expresses similar views in her essay ‘Realities and Reflections’: “In our country, parents feel very unhappy at the birth of a girl. A girl is really an undesirable object…parents do not receive happiness from a girl as they receive from a boy”. (Sangari 136). The multifarious discriminations and injustice against women are far from being over. They still flourish in many forms. Talking of universal exploitation of women, Chandra Talpade Mohanty observes:

Women and girls are still 70 per cent of the world’s poor and majority of the world’s refugees. They comprise almost 80 per cent of the displaced persons of The Third World/South Africa, Asia and Latin America. They own less than one-hundredth of the world’s property while they are hardest hit by the effects of war, domestic violence and religious persecution. (Feminism without Borders 134)

Women bear the brunt of multiple forms of exploitation that originate from class, caste, cultural and patriarchal systems. The studies have revealed that women’s subordinated position is perpetuated and reinforced by their limited access to or control over resources. “In a country like India, women get doubly marginalized by virtue of being poor and being woman” (Vijayanti 203). Development projects that tend to ignore women’s needs and contributions have failed miserably. Until and unless women are fully empowered to participate in national programmes and projects, gain access to and control of both material and information resources, they
will not be able to challenge patriarchal ideologies and transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and social inequality.

Their story of their discrimination and pathos is unending. They toil hard day and night for the sake of their husband and children and their contribution is seldom recognized. According to a survey, “Women produce 70 to 80 per cent of the food in India and have always been the hardest hit by natural calamities and poverty. The contradictions between civil laws and Hindu and Muslim personal laws affect women but rarely men. (133). V. Geetha in her essay ‘Gender and Logic of Brahmanism’ brings out that our discrimination, our unnatural behaviour, our strange attitude towards the girls turn them into a burden to the parents. They become a cause of concern to themselves. Our undue concern turns them into inert, lifeless dolls that have to be pampered and praised. (Sangari 220)

In India, gender discrimination still persists in one form or the other. It has penetrated all walks of life and affects their life and behaviour in innumerable ways. Even minor issues like clothing are not spared by this all-pervasive, stinking discrimination in our families. Meera Kosambi’s Anandibai cries out in ‘Realities and Reflections’: 

We never wear warm clothes which are considered to be immodest. Similarly, we do not wear footwear or shoes… these luxury items are made for men who suffer from heat, cold or rain. These are not meant for women who, it is believed, are not at all affected by bad weather. (Sangari 149)

According to Miranda Davies, in India, there is an urgent need to encourage and motivate the rural, backward and disadvantaged women to assert themselves in the society. There is a need to change the mindset, the very attitude towards women. Kamala Bhasin, an independent feminist, dedicated to the mobilization of India’s rural poor observes:

In my opinion, the real challenge is to help the poor, oppressed, illiterate women not so much to read and understand the word but to read, understand and control their world…They must feel that they do not have to continue to accept and adjust to conditions of inhumanity and indignity. They must develop the desire and power to change their own lives, to create their own destiny. (Davies110)

Talking of numerous myths and stereotypes causing havoc with the health and status of Indian women, Miranda Davies observes:
The virtues recommended for women are the age-old ones of sacrifice, self-abnegation, living for others, docility, love, softness etc. There are stories of Sita, Savitri, and Draupadi. All these are (unfortunately) considered more important than information and legal rights of women, social legislation like minimum wages...marriage and divorce laws, equal wages etc... Until and unless such stereotypes are uprooted, the emancipation of women is not possible. (109)

In the present scenario, more and more women in India feel the need for articulation. They want to break their isolation and work as a united whole to fight against the callous patriarchy. The media can do a great deal in bringing the focus on this fight. Talking of the role of media, Kamala Bhasin observes:

We, women must create alternatives in different media and use them to inform and empower women to get them out of their isolation. We must make ourselves more visible and audible so that our concerns do not remain unarticulated and unattended. (142)

A lot of efforts have been made to stop misrepresentation of women in print and electronic media. A lot more needs to be done by concerned individuals and groups to make a dent in the existing media to incorporate the complexities of human experience, emphasize respect and equality between the sexes and challenge the existing media thrust towards male glorification and female degradation. “Today, there is an urgent need to question the ways how recognition is accorded to one kind of work and denied to another. If men work outside, women toil hard day and night inside homes. We need to change our attitude towards women” (Menon 177). It is not only the equality of women with men but more than it. It aims at social transformation. According to Sushila Singh, “The word ‘feminism’ must be understood in its broadest sense as referring to an intense awareness of identity as a woman, and interest in feminine problems. It’s meaning should not be restricted to advocacy of women’s rights.”(21)

However, with the spread of female education, extensive industrialization and urbanization Indian women have changed a lot. As awareness has dawned upon them, they are assertively demanding recognition of their uniqueness and reject the devalued stereotypes of their role. The feminist agenda is based on the principles of similarity and difference. Writings by women about women is a clarion call to feminine representation by gynocritics. The work of Indian women writers is significant in making society aware of women’s demands and in providing a medium for self-
expression and thus, rewriting the history of India. They are claiming the right to control their work, their bodies and their lives rather than letting men assume this control. They are not creating an ‘other world of female retreat’ but are rather changing the world ‘in the image of woman-centered values’ (Bulbeck 135). Their objectives include the formation of alternative social, political or economic institutions, attaining the control of their own bodies, reproductive rights and freedom from violence and discrimination. Modern writers depict the diversity of women and the diversity within each woman rather than limiting the lives of women to one ideal.

These assertive, enlightened women are going all out to demolish the structures of gendered subjectivity for establishment of a blissful social order. Their vociferous denunciation of the Sita and Savitri ideal and of Manu, the lawgiver’s three cultural bondages to father, husband and son, are striking evidences that women are storming cultural issues which are largely man-made to serve the interests of all-pervasive, dehumanizing patriarchy and are going all out to create a new social system. They have realized that by glorifying the traditional role of women as housewives and undertaking monotonous and unpaid drudgery of household work, they were promoting the interests of the patriarchal set up and ruining their own physical and mental health.

Indian feminism is deeply rooted in the vision and ideology of reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Rai, Jyotiba Phule and thinkers such as Tagore, Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi who had a strong desire to eradicate the social evils like Sati, child marriage, ill treatment of widows etc. Many Indian feminists have dealt with domestic violence, education and female sexuality. Feminist theorists like Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty etc living in the West are also trying to improve the condition of women.

Gandhi, who holds a unique position among the social reformers, wanted women to be uplifted from their misery and inequality; yet he did not want them to be a mere replica of the western woman. He wanted them to emerge as strong controlling, purifying and steadying hands conserving what is best in our culture and rejecting what is base and degrading. He exhorted them to fight against injustices inflicted upon them by men non-violently. His entire concept of ahimsa (non-violence), constructive activity and satyagrah were suited to what he called the characteristic qualities of women - love, non-violence and self-sacrifice. “If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with women…who can make a more
creative appeal to the heart than women?...Women are the nature messengers of the gospel of non-violence” (qtd. Choudhury Reform and Revival 69). According to Vina Majumdar, Gandhi’s greatest contribution towards raising of women’s status “lay in his revolutionary approach towards women.” He respected their ‘personal dignity’ and gave them equal task to perform in the achievement of freedom (69). Most importantly, he campaigned for self-reliance of women by postulating for their economic independence and personal freedom. He saw them “not as objects of reform and humanitarianism but as self-conscious arbiters of their own destiny” (71).

He was strictly against the subordination of women. He emphasized the essential equality of women with men and exhorted them to live and work in the light of this truth. He laid a lot of emphasis on the innate qualities and infinite potential of women. He exhorted them to assert themselves and take humanity to greater heights. He believed that only women could transform the society with their tremendous patience and infinite potential:

Refuse to …be the slaves of men….if you want to give out the proper scent, it must come out of your heart and then you will captivate not man but the whole humanity. It is your birthright. Man is born of woman, he is flesh of her flesh and bone of her bone. Come to your own and deliver the message again. (Padia 399)

Growth of Indian Feminist Movement

The feminist movement started in India in the mid 19th Century against the society’s harsh, unjust treatment of women. Before independence, various women’s issues like gender norms were raised by some of India’s pioneering feminist literary critics in their own languages. Tarabai Shinde (1850-1910) a Marathi Hindu through “A Comparison of Men and Women” (Stri Purush Tulana 1882) radically presents a critique of gender construction as a norm of patriarchy and glorifies Indian womanhood. Cornelia Sorabji (1866-1954), a Parsi Christian advocated education for women and removing evil practices like child marriages in order to bring social reformation. Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain (1880-1932) a Bengali Muslim writer in her feminist utopia “Sultana’s Dream” (1905) imagined a world where women took charge of the political sphere. Through it, she depicts a gender reversed purdah in an alternate and futuristic world.

During the freedom struggle, (1915-1947) an independent women’s movement paved the way for equal opportunities in education and status of women in Indian culture. According to Susie Tharu, 19th Century concerns with women’s
‘uplift’ continue to underwrite government policies and initiatives even in the 1890s, these concerns include the fight against such social evils as dowry, child marriage, purdah and the prohibition of widow remarriage. They also call for an education that would enable women to perform their roles as wives, mothers and school teachers in an enlightened and socially useful mode. By the 1930s, women’s organizations at the national level had started making their presence felt not only in relation to these issues, but also politically in the demand for equal rights. (Susie and Tharu 15)

In 1947, Leela Kasturi tried to deal with some important issues concerning women like property rights, alimony, custody rights and child maintenance. Although during the 20th Century colonial period, feminist writings in India were engaged in creating an Indian identity for themselves, after independence the debates on feminism shifted towards the ways in which feminist politics was practiced in the Indian patriarchal set up. So “the feminist critics in post-colonial India” according to Jasbir Jain, “struggle against the entrenched patriarchal structures in the country which still continue to control and restrict the lives of women in one form or the other.” (Women’s Writing : 23-24)

During the post-independence period, famous feminists like Gail Omvedt and Ilina Sen tried to explore the basic causes of women’s oppression. In the contemporary times, Madhu Kishwar and Maitrayee Chaudhuri are at the forefront battling for justice and equality for women. Madhu Kishwar brings to the centre stage of political discourse, various issues and problems of women related to dowry, land rights, co-ownership rights for women and sex-determination through her journal Manushi. Through her famous essay “Why I do not call myself a feminist” she, despite advocating authoritarian and coercive methods, appealed to the moral conscience of people to bring social reforms for women. So theoretical frameworks of Indian feminism have developed and transformed over time to create a space for women in response to material realities of living condition, different ideologies on gender issues, linguistic and political competencies and different events in history.

**Footprints in Indian Literature**

Women wrote in different regional languages in India from the Vedic period to the modern era about their powerlessness and exploitation under patriarchal culture like Buddhist nuns writing in Pali in the 6th Century B.C., Akkamahadevi of twelfth century wrote in Kannad, Janabai of fourteenth century in Marathi, Lal Ded of fourteenth...
century in Kashmiri, Mirabai, Chandrabati, and Therighata of the sixteenth century wrote respectively in Hindi, Bengali and Pali etc about their victimization and revolted against it. In Akkamdevi’s poetry, the spiritual union tends to be described in terms of a sexual union. Her poetry emphasizes the complementarities of Siva and Sakti. When the two are seen as parts of a whole, their independent identification becomes meaningless. Another important saint poet Mirabai rejected the material world that accompanied married life and challenged the male authority in her own way. She took to travelling, dancing and singing even in her widowhood. Thus, feminist literature in India has its origin in the Indian context itself and does not follow its western counterpart blindly for its quest for identity.

In traditional Indian writing in English, we often find the recurrent image of an average Indian woman who leads a truncated life as an ignorant, uneducated, tradition bound, family-oriented and victimized being. Although the first generation Indian English writers such as Raja Rao, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurbindo etc projected strong independent, full-blooded women characters, they recreated the fundamental and archetypal image of her which is of submission and surrender. So in its real sense, Indian literary feminism is traceable in the works of later women writers such as Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal, Kamala Markandaya etc in novel; in poetry in the works of Toru Dutt, Kamala Das etc and in drama it can be traced in the works of Manjula Padmanabhan. In their works, the age-old image of woman is slowly blurring and gradually shifting towards a new vibrant image.

Anita Desai, through her psychological novels, portrays the inner frustrations and sufferings of her female protagonists, their existential predicament and resistance against the so called ‘normalcy’ in a male-dominated society. Kamala Markandya explores the conflicts inside and outside the heart of her female characters and tries to find a solution at a universal level in her novels. Nayantara Sehgal advocates civil liberties for her women characters and depicts the injustice done to them in matrimony. Shashi Deshpande’s female protagonists, suppressed under the conventional male-dominated society, create their own fate by encountering the world.

Toru Dutt (1856-77) is credited with being the first woman poet of India writing in English. Her poetic collection, Ancient Ballads And Legends of Hindustan (1882) glorifies Indian womanhood giving them names such as Sita and Savitri. She sings of Savitri’s matchless wifely devotion. Sita, Savitri and Jagadhyya Uma are the ideal representative of Indian womanhood and offer an opportunity to the poetess to
reveal the mysterious feminine nature. Her main anxiety here is, indeed, to project Savitri as a free woman, who has the freedom to wander, to choose her friend and even to choose her husband. Here her effort is to rebut the negative image projected by the British and redeem the image of Indian women. In this regard, A. N. Dwivedi aptly remarks “This prestigious child of our culture was the first major Indo-Anglican author who forcefully interpreted the soul of India to the West, and thereby, acted as a bridge between the east and the west.” (Dwivedi 51)

Sarojini Naidu (1879-1947) in many ways belongs to the same phase in Indo-Anglican writing. She was a poet, a staunch freedom fighter, a feminist and an administrator. As a poet, she mainly dealt with the fundamental aspects of human life such as life, love, death, fate, nation and the woman. Naidu remained unmoved by the modern movement and seems more under the influence of ideal females of Indian culture, and depicts the archetypes of Indian womanhood, such as Sita and Savitri and portrays women in self-effacing and self-sacrificing roles. She presents conventional myths about women in a patriotic manner. Yet the image of women, she projects is strong and determined. In her speeches, she stressed on the educational needs of women and felt drawn towards the Indian underprivileged woman. In an impassioned speech, she exclaims: “Therefore, I charge you...restore to your women their ancient rights, for as I have said it is we, and not you, who are the real nation builders, and without our active co-operation at all points of progress all your congress and conferences are in vain” (Naidu,1918:16). Her poem, “Pardah Nashin” penetrates and unfolds the very heart of those women who are exploited by male-dominated societies. The poem boldly questions the veiling of women, the 'ghunghat', 'burkha' and 'chadder' which are gender-specific garments to repress a woman’s identity.

The change in the perspective becomes clearer in the works of the later women writers. Kamala Das takes a sudden turn from her predecessors with the publication of Summer in Calcutta in 1965. She virtually inaugurates a new movement in Indian women's poetry in English. She attacks a whole way of life characterized by patriarchal norms in a daring and uninhibited style with an unprecedented gusto. Her path-breaking poetry witnesses a change from an early romanticism to a more realistic, candid and experimental poetry. She is not ready to accept man as ‘Subject’, ‘the Absolute’ and woman as ‘the Object’, ‘the Other’. In her prose and poetry, she is desperate to debunk the structure of patriarchy. She questions the sexual rights of man and is resolute to win back her position as a human being.
She refuses to be bound by the fetters of femininity and cannot develop a sense of invisibility. She acted as a pioneer and showed the way to a whole generation of women poets like Mamta Kalia Gauri Deshpande, Eunice de Souza, Melanie Silgardo, Sunita Jain, Tara Patel, Imtiaz Dharker, Sujata Bhatt, Margaret Chatterjee, Mukta Sambrani, Menka Shivdesai and many more.

These women poets show a total rejection of the past and raise their voice against social and cultural conventions. They write against those societal forces which become obstacles in the growth of their feminine sensibilities and deny/reject the traditional roles of a loyal mother, wife or daughter. In this regard, Kanwar Dinesh Singh aptly comments: “The new women poets are concerned with their essential feminine sensibilities and in a bold and candid manner; they articulate their protest against gender discrimination” (08). Though the three poets taken up for this study belong to different cultural backgrounds, their response to feminist consciousness profusely expressed in their poetry attracts a comparative study. Based on humanitarian perspective, the study brings out their common experience of the universe as human beings.

After the publication of Kamala Das’s maiden volume *Summer in Calcutta*, Charmanye D Souza’s “When God First Made a Whore”, Sujata Bhatt’s “Iris”, “The Women of Leh are Such”, Dharker’s “Purdah I”, “List”, “Another Woman”, “Battle Line”, “8 January 1993”, Eunice De Souza’s “The Road”, “Miss Louise”, “Pilgrim”, Milanie Silgardo’s “Stationery Shop”, “Child”, Mamta Kalia’s “Compulsions”, “Sheer Good Luck”, Menka Shivdasni’s “The Atheist’s Confessions”, Meena Alexander’s “The Storm”, and “The Gardener” etc are some of the notable samples that reflect the increasing social awareness among the modern women poets. All these poets write about woman’s life and experiences, travails and sense of resignation, fierce rebellion and submission exploring her psyche and situation through myriad forms and nuances.

All these poets focus on current ‘feminist issues’, speaking against oppression of women, expose the hypocrisy of the society, attack those customs and traditions that help keep women subjugated and complain against their men or husbands for being insensitive, crude or sexist. They also raise their voice against various social evils, like female foeticide, infanticide, discrimination against girl child, dowry deaths, wife beating, prostitution and other forms of sexual and social exploitation.
Modern women poets have been successful in their feminist struggle to a considerable extent and they are struggling hard to scale newer heights. They have attained freedom and equality of opportunity in education, work, politics everywhere. These post-independence women poets are more concerned with reflecting the harsh realities of life. Unlike their predecessors, they do not celebrate the sacrifice of great women like Sita and Savitri, which has been always glorified in Indian culture/literature. By introducing a bold, new frankness into their poetry, they seek meaning and order in personal relationships and explore human sexuality with a confessional candour. So they are more inclined towards self-discovery, self-expression and self assertion and explore their collective consciousness and shared experiences in order to transcend the fragmentation and isolation of their lives.

The arrival of Kamala Das was a turning point in the history of Indian women’s poetry in English. She is poles apart from earlier women poets – Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu and took Indian women’s poetry in English far ahead. She originated a vigorous and poignant feminine confessional poetry in which a common theme is the man-woman relationship. For Das, her poetry is a medium to explore the modern Indian female psyche. A loud voice of protest from the feminist perspective reverberates in her prose and poetry. Her poetry has been a relentless search for true love and the female identity. Her poem, “An Introduction” is a brilliant piece of work in which she deconstructs patriarchal constructs sanctioned by the tradition-bound Indian society. The poem voices universal womanhood, which gets stifled and has no choice in the existing patriarchal set up. She reflects in it how patriarchy tries to fit her into traditional roles and dictates terms to her. “Dress in saree, be girl / Be wife they said, be embroiderer, be a cook.” But she rejects all categories and goes to the extent of denying her womanliness: “I wore a shirt and/ wore my brother’s trousers, cut my hair short and ignored / my womanliness”(26). Her Radha – Krishna myth provides her an appropriate context to express her hunger for pure love. As a feminist writer Kamala Das is riddled with emotions at the plight of Indian women in a patriarchal society. In India where dowry deaths, female infanticide, and various other forms of exploitation are everyday happenings, her female consciousness cries out vociferously seeking action. Justifying Das’s concerns as a feminist poet, K.Satchidanandanand observes:

She refuses to glorify the historical past…. She rejects the patriarchal value system that is based on egoism, greed for power, expansionism, hero cult, violence, war, mindless
exploitation of nature, the misuse of intelligence and supremacy of reason and theory over sensitiveness and experience. (qtd. in Prasad 103)

Kamala Das was later joined by a whole generation of younger women poets in order to establish an image of women totally independent of conventional falsifying concepts, as the matter was not of a single woman but a whole generation’s pangs of birth, who now began to confess, disclose their feelings, emotions and intimate experiences frankly and in an innovative style.

Imtiaz Dharker is a major female voice of the post modernistic phase of Indian English poetry. She had her social and cultural growth in Pakistan, England and India. She lives with the passion of an undaunted rebel, not to retreat and never to fail. Her expression is honest and has the courage of conviction. Her poetry is a vehement protest against the subjugation and suppression of women in Islam. Her rebellion has caused a flutter among the guardians of orthodox religion and the custodians of orthodox religion and culture. Arundhati Subramaniam observes that in Dharker’s poetry, “There is an excellent celebration of the ‘self’ that strips off layers of superfluous identity with grace and abandon only to discover that it has not diminished, but grown larger, … and more inclusive.” (Online)

An excellent artist and documentary film maker, Imtiaz is an important presence in the world of Indian Poetry in English. One of the major concerns in her trendsetting poetry is to present the hollowness of the socio-cultural and socio-religious restrictions on woman that have robbed them of their immense potential. With her unique and subtle artistry, she presents her new perspectives and the suppressed and silenced womanhood. Her humanistic and feminist concerns with anguish and agony, sympathy and protest give the message silently, though its deafening explosion has been felt everywhere. The social and cultural barriers insulating the individuality of a woman are seen in new light and new perspectives in her poetry.

“Purdah I” is a silent protest, an eloquent criticism of the purdah tradition, strictly imposed on Muslim women. A socio-religious custom has been portrayed as symbolic of repression of women. Our attention is drawn to the turning point in the life of a Muslim girl when she suddenly becomes conscious of her sexual growth and others are perhaps more conscious.

However, the landmark poem is about being a woman and not just a Muslim Woman. Imtiaz Dharker herself has admitted, “I don’t see myself as a spokesperson
for the community. I feel that woman generally is too accepting of the guilt they always feel" (*Talking Poems*). Purdah is suppression and deadening of the intellectual awakening and growth of a woman. It is a wall between the woman and the world. It curbs and restricts the speech and expression. It is a repression of her will and choice.

The programmed minds behind the *Purdah* know behaviour and a code of conduct. There is an awareness of guilt in case of any violation of the code of conduct. The people around her are the same but their looks, attitude get changed with a purpose. They start looking at her as an object, not as a human being! The hypocritical and secretive eyes constantly examine her and break her into pieces. She is no more than an object of sexual gratification.

Dharker has broadened the thematic concerns of Indian English Poetry by exploring her immediate social surroundings. The poem ‘Another Woman’ presents a woman who is a representation of so many women of Indian subcontinent for whom life is not their choice. The poem describes the brutality and inhumanity where women are disposed off after being exploited in the worst possible manner. The woman in the poem is a typical woman of the Indian subcontinent. She is accomplished in her homemaker’s role.

But her care and concern go unrewarded and abuses and curses are hurled at her. Ironically, all her domestic virtues fail to secure for her a welcome presence in the family. Her parents are cursed. The destiny of the woman in the traditionally oppressive society has been presented in a very touching way:

> This was the house she had been sent to
> the man she had been bound to,
>
> the future she had been born into, (39)

Nothing in her life was chosen by her. Everything was thrust forcibly upon her. Yet she has to endure the undeserved sufferings till she is killed or she kills herself. Only death ends her anguish and agony:

> “So when the kerosene was thrown…. It was the only choice / that she had ever known. (39)

The title “Another Woman” ironically shows the tragic fate of a woman as a casual happening. The phrases ‘Another Torch’, ‘Another Woman’ refer to the inhuman aspects of the much prattled Indian culture.
Imtiaz Dharker writes with the aim of rejuvenating the wounded female psyche. The poems like “Battle Line” condemn the opportunistic, vacillating man-woman relationship in the modern context. Lovers have lost their ‘passion’ and ‘love’ has also lost its sanctity. The lovers or husband and wives are like the nations with lines demarcating their territories. Of course, there are some checkpoints on the border which are erected and demolished at will. The relationship of a temporary love, a convenience is summed up in terse idiom:

Having come home

All you can do is leave. (49)

Thoroughly disgusted with the sufferings of women, Imtiaz portrays them as suppressed and repressed. Even their breath, all their movements, their gestures are controlled and guided. Even the ‘doors’, ‘windows’ and ‘walls’ of the house connive to regiment them. Even their minds, thoughts and ideas have been blocked and they are rendered crippled. She is nothing but a crack, a crevice where the light forgot to shine (31). She is not allowed to even smile as it has to be stifled with a sari end. Even the natural process like menstruation is despised upon and she is not permitted to enter the holy shrines. Zarina’s mother cracks under malaise of poverty and life is no better than a curse for her. Dharker portrays her numerous pains and peeves in all their nuances:

It is not that Zarina’s mother is callous

..........................

Just living is hard enough, when you

have four children,

a drunken husband, and a clawing

hunger tearing inside. (“Zarina’s Mother”, PAOP 35)

Dharker’s “Purdah I” presents the best example how patriarchy uses woman to condition another woman. The poem exposes how hapless women are taught to ashamed of their own bodies, “She was old enough to learn some shame/ She found it came quite naturally” (PAOP 3). This happens with the onset of puberty and shows how women suffer for even natural things in life be it female body or natural Biological processes like menstruation. Dharker’s “Grace”, Bhatt’s “Udaylee” show
how women are regarded as defiled and treated as untouchables. This gives an insight into common practices across two cultures; Muslim culture on one hand and the Gujarati community of Bhatt’s childhood. In “Zarina’s Mother”, mother looks at the future onset of puberty in her daughter as some disease:

‘Yes, I know what it is she’s got
The doctor told me. Not tomorrow.
Not next week, but one day
Ten years from now
The disease will flare inside her.’ (*PAOP* 35)

According to Dharker, the fate of a girl child is sealed right from her birth and with age it gets worse. Girls are forced to go for traditional arranged marriages without any choice of their own. They are taught to “cover their brightness tightly round” (*PAOP* 7). To her utter shock and surprise, they are prohibited from entering the mosque as in their seductive presence, men cannot concentrate on prayers. They are treated as filthy, impure and unhygienic. They are supposed to defile the mosque as menstruation renders them impure. But how strange! Man is produced from the same blood.

The very title of the poem “Grace” is ironical as the whole poem is about the disgrace of women. It is strange that these women have to observe purdah even from God:

But woman, woman/ you have learnt
That when God comes/ you hide your head. (*PAOP* 8)

Despite all this, Dharker doesn’t feel pity for these hapless women but on the other hand, goes to celebrate ‘the feminine mystique with an interesting argument’ (Naik,2006:150). Hence, very proudly she says in “No Man’s Land”:

It is the woman who knows
You can take in/the invader, time after time
And still be whole. (*PAOP* 51)

It is the woman who can face the onslaughts of patriarchy with courage and still be whole. She wants to do something concrete to alter the condition of women
and hopes that through her poetry, she may be able to change the mindset of the people. She expresses her hope in “The Word”:

Prepare to heal or wound,
give birth to a whole nest
of hungry thoughts. (58)

So Dharker concludes her first book on the note that a woman’s condition may change when she will be able to break the shackles of culture, religion and society. “The section concludes with profound revelation that emancipation for a woman has to be only in the breaking of these barricades set up by conventional codes of patriarchy and redefining herself” (Baskaran 33).

Her second volume “The Postcards from God” (1994) condemns the plastic religion, the fake created by humans in the name of religion. This sort of religion is a killer in disguise and the poet spews venom against it. Her poems like “6 December 1992”, “8 January 1993”, “The List” etc portray the filthy politics and communal riots in Mumbai in 1993. Her poems like “Namesake”, “Adam’s Daughter”, “Adam from New Zealand”, “Living Space” etc deal with filth and squalor, grinding poverty which she had witnessed in the slums of Mumbai.

She writes about an incident of bride burning so common in Indian society. The anger is expressed in heavy beats and forced onomatopoeic words:

The bolt bangs in
A match is struck and thrown
The burning has begun. (8 January 1993” 142)

Innumerable crimes against women go unnoticed in our society. They are tortured and brutalized all around. In a poem “Signals” Dharker cries out:

It’s too easy for you
To tear me up, throw me away,
Take my picture and pull it apart,
Sharpen the blade,
Cut me out of your heart. (Postcards from God 81)
Indian women are scorned, humiliated and insulted even in their own homes. Numerous suffocating customs drain out their energies and potential. They are divested of the freedom of movement and expression. They are conditioned to denigrate themselves and glorify the men folk. The poem “Frame” portrays the pathetic situation:

They have put me in a frame
And left me here
Trapped behind glass
Among the hanging clothes

Can’t they see my hands
are tied? (90)

In her third poetic volume, the poet goes a step further and brings out that women can assert themselves only with Satan inside them. They are valued and respected only when they are carrying a child, or a devil inside them. She visualizes a bright future for women only when they assert themselves and discard obsolete dead customs and traditions imposed upon them. Intiaz Dharker uses irony more as a message than a weapon. She has successfully and boldly demolished the religious and cultural barriers imposed and superimposed by the patriarchal society. For Dharker, Her poetry becomes a tool to empathize with women and other invisible people in Indian society. The daughter-in-law doused in kerosene and set alight to ("Another Woman"), the little boy from the slum ("Your Namesake"), and the girl begging at crossroads ("Adam’s Daughter") grasp the attention of the readers and depict that she is deeply pained at these social evils. The following lines from “Adam’s Daughter”, reveal how the poor girls face maximum brunt of the poverty of their parents:

…Her mouth works busily
but her mind is still,
waiting to see
what my next move will be. (Postcards from God 130)
Sujata Bhatt, another poet under study, is bicultural by birth and migration and tricultural by marriage. She was born in Ahmedabad; grew up in Pune; moved with her parents to USA; and finally married a German and settled in Germany. Her poetry reflects her strong sense of Indian diaspora and her cross-cultural identity. However, a large number of her poems express her feminist longings and talk about numerous discriminations against women that drain out their creative potential. Many of her poems express her apprehensions for the loss of her identity in an alien land. She freely paints the poverty, squalor and all-round corruption in India. The poems like “Kankaria Lake”, “Virologist” etc. express her concern for degradation of the environment, disappearing flora and fauna due to extensive industrialization and urbanization. In her three poetic volumes under study – *Brunizem*, *Monkey Shadows* and *Augatora*, she reminisces and dwells at length on Indian myths, legends and personalities. She attracts her readers towards the rich and composite Indian culture and talks of Sarasvati, Parvati, Hanuman, Gandhi, Hirabai, Devibhen Pathak, Nanabhai Bhatt etc. When asked to describe her cultural identity, she answered:

... I am a blend of different cultures or a hybrid. In some ways, I am an Indian, whereas in others I have been influenced by growing up in America. And I would say that I am influenced by living in Europe, in Germany,... there is a style of meeting and socializing that I also feel a part of. Very broadly, I would say that I am an Indian in the diaspora. (Sandten 21)

But it is this very tryst with different cultures that has enriched her poetic idiom. As she says, “in a way exile brought me closer to India. I started reading everything I could find about Indian history, art, mythology and literature… I consider myself living in the world as opposed to living in one country.” (4)

In her poetry, Bhatt consciously (sometimes) half-consciously writes about ‘Eastern’ as well as ‘Western’ cultural contexts which are often merged, played off against each other or confirmed in their affinity, mutuality or complimentarity. Marked by an experience of ‘unstable cultural identity’, Bhatt constantly shows the potential and scope of her poetic imagination. In dealing with her cultural ‘border territory’, she can always go back to her mental landmarks, the memories of her childhood in India—people, friends, familiar voices, sounds, smells, myths and stories and draw on them while she is making creative moves into the new environments. She evidently feels the need to rewrite literature in which traditional, epics, myths and stories can be perceived as subjects of her poems. Her work is characterized by continuous cultural influences, in terms of blended identity or syncretic way of writing. In her poems, she focuses on India, while living in the USA and on America while living in Germany—the “power to
control and give shape to any given environment in order not to be intimidated or overwhelmed by its foreignness. (Sandten 97)

In her maiden volume *Brunizem*, a number of poems like “Parvati”, “Buffaloes”, “The Kamasutra Retold”, “Udaylee”, “Sherdi” etc express her feminist longings in her unique way. Most of these poems are steeped in Indian settings. The poet seems to be questioning that in a society where males are given all the privileges, why are women treated as inanimate beings? Why are their natural instincts and urges ignored? In “Parvati” she openly questions why she has given all her energy, power to Shiva:

In the first story she was

Taking a bath, washing her hair

………………………………

She was slow, she dawdled in order to regain

All her energy

All her shakti-fragrant self

For Shiva (43)

In “Muliebrity” she recalls the poverty-stricken face of an Indian girl who is hardly aware of any progress and prosperity of the world around her and takes delight whenever she finds a new mound of cow dung:

… the power glistening through her cheekbones

Each time she found a particularly promising

Mound of dung. (26)

Her “Devibhen Pathak” condemns the practice of dowry which saps the last ounce of a mother’s energy (*Monkey Shadows* 46) while “What Happened to the Elephant” questions Lord Shiva about the fate of the elephant whose head, he chopped off to provide the head to his son. Bhatt seems to be conveying the bitter truth that men go to any extent to suppress and exploit women, the weak and the vulnerable.

Gauri Deshpande (1942-2003), another contemporary poet, produced three collections of poems, *Between Births* (1968), *Last Love* (1970), *Beyond The Slaughter House* (1972). Her main concerns are various aspects of love, sex, man-
woman relationships and its tensions and frustrations. She is similar to Kamala Das in her expression as well as sensibility, but she writes in a more controlled manner. She projects a “prowling unrest” through her poetry. Love, death, loss and search, memory and nostalgia, and man-woman relationship etc are some of the core themes in her poetry. Her poems display the crucial struggle of the psyche to overcome the tensions of different stages of her relationship with man. Her husband’s love doesn’t provide any satisfaction to her and she yearns for the company of the lover who makes her seem schizophrenic. She doesn’t like even her child to be born with her husband’s features but imagines her lover’s “smoky blue eyes and golden hair”:

I wished upon my child

That is born with her father’s face. (“Poems in Winter” 35-36)

Like Kamala Das, she is bold and ebullient and writes in a self-conscious style. Her poetry becomes a search for the essential woman and she begins this search from herself, which provides both sincerity and spirit to her verse.

Both Kamala Das and Gauri Despande write mainly about love and human relationships. Emotional satisfaction, spiritual communion at the level of mind and heart, tenderness and care are pursued but remain unfulfilled with both the poets.

Tara Patel like Das displays in her poetic volume Single Woman (1991) that in the harsh reality of the world, the quest for true love and companionship is a difficult task. The image of woman that she presents is strong and determined and she argues for a sense of community, justice and companionship. In her poetry, we hear the voice of the ‘New Woman’ and her quest for her identity. Like Kamala Das, she writes very frankly and without inhibitions:

I want to touch a man. Touch me, touch, touch me somewhere, Give me permission to touch you. (Naik, 2006:150)

What is the fate of a woman’s life in a male-dominated world? How does phallocentrism inflict excruciating pain in a woman’s life? She answers it through her poems e.g. in “Woman”:

A woman’s life is a reaction

To the crack of a whip

She learns to dodge it as it whistles. (Prasad 276)
In her poetry, we find a sense of exploitation at being born a woman and also a yearning for love, caring and understanding. She is tortured by the indifference of patriarchal institutions. Interestingly, in man’s poetry we still hear the conventional male voice and see the conventional negative portrayal of women. The six volumes of Nissim Ezekiel which present woman as mother, wife, whore, sex object and seductress present an appropriate example.

Eunice de Souza (b.1940) is the most combative woman poet after Kamala Das. She has published four volumes of poetry: *Fix* (1979), *Women in Dutch Painting* (1988), *Ways of Belonging* (1990), and *Selected and New Poems* (1994). Like Das, she rejects the restrictions imposed by the categorizers and denies her ‘womanliness’. A host of her poems are satires and are in a confessional mode. They satirize various aspects of male domination and blind subjugation of women. In her maiden volume *Fix*, she ridicules the Catholic conservative falsity and exudes her feelings of wrath, confusion and desolation. The opening poem “Catholic Mother” portrays how a woman is turned into a child-producing machine oppressed by patriarchal father:

*Father of the year*

*By the grace of God he says*

*We’ve had seven children*

*(in seven years)*

*……………..*

*The pillars wife*

*Says nothing.*

*(Nine Indian Women Poets 39)*

Her poetry presents women struggling for their identity in a conservative, tabooed society. By breaking the age-long constraints of convention and tradition, she very boldly raises the silent voice of tormented women. She advocates the freedom of suffocated women in a male-dominated culture and exposes the male mentality as:

*I have heard it said / My parents wanted a boy/

I’ve done my best to qualify. / I hid the blood stains/

of my clothes/ And let my breasts sag.* (Iyengar 727)
Sunita Namjoshi (b.1941) began her career with Poems 1967. She gave an ironic
treatment to the traditional Indian notions of love, marriage, parenthood, and life in
general and exposed the various ideals of Indian society: “She deftly turns traditional
fables upside down” (Naik 85). Her main concerns are the condition of women, human
existence and various social issues. Namjoshi celebrates lesbian eroticism in her poetic
collection Jackass and the Lady (1967) and The Blue Donkey Fables (1988). Many
of her works explore issues of gender and sexual orientation.

Sunita Jain (b.1941) resembles Kamala Das in her sudden outbursts of feelings.
Although she celebrates tenderness and the joy of love, she is aware of its
disappointments and discriminations and presents them in her poetry. She, like Das,
presents a poetry of protest which is highly personal. In her poem “They Prey”, she feels
like a prey engaged in an unequal fight against the ‘anglers’. In another poem “It’s a
Promise” she goes against the orthodoxy and asserts herself:

I shall (it's a promise)
Sing once again
Of all that you
My darling
Killed (Sensum 143)

Debjani Chatterjee, (b.1952) daughter of a diplomat, grew up in different
countries and is, presently, living in England. Her title poem in I Was That Woman
(1989) established her position as a committed feminist. Through it, she examines the
roles of all great women, like Sita, Draupadi, Joan of Arc, starting with Eve, the first rebel
and ending with the modern Typist girl.

I was that woman who roused a nation
And was burnt so many times at so many stakes. (Chatterjee,1989:217-48)

Anna Sujatha Modayil (b.1934) presents through her poetry the unbearable pain
experienced by women. Her poem “Women’s Loneliness” presents a women’s longing
for perfection, her pursuit of an ever-eluding true love, her actual drudgery, labour and
search for joys of tomorrow that will ultimately end in loneliness.

We are the women who wait
Have waited so long that our eyes
Are weary with weeping
And yet we wait. (Prasad 35)
Charmayne D’Souza (b.1955) wittily remarks in the title poem of her poetic volume in *A Spelling Guide to Women* (1990) and examines the man-woman relationship:

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Woo men / womb men / woe men / whim men

Warm men / who men? / no woman. (Papke 75)
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Melanie Silgado (b.1956) examines all human relationships using irony in a blunt tone. She writes poems centring around the father-daughter relationship, e.g. her poem “For Father on the Shelf” is quite startling:

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Father, you will be proud to know
you left something behind.
The year you died
I inherited a mind
Wherever you are, will you
turn your index finger away?
And now I’m writing with my life
the price of an inherited crutch. (Papke 75)
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Menka Shivdasani (b.1961) presents the pathetic condition of women through her poetry; the horrors and temptations of living alone, the anxieties of a single life which gets complicated by being a woman, the sordid world of sex and broken relationships. Her poem “School Girl No More” presents the modern woman’s frustrations and “The Game You Play” strikes a strong note of feminism and shows how women are regarded as mere playthings in the hands of men.

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Football is another world
Where men belong what the hell
Am I doing
kicked around
Just because I’ve got this leather hide? (Prasad 276)
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Lakshmi Kannan, (b.1947) a bilingual writer in Tamil and English gives a vivid description of various stages of a woman’s life in a male-dominated world through her
poetry. Like Kamala Das, she is fed up of the ‘warning’ voice of elders:

No don’t run

Don’t take long strides, don’t raise your voice,

Be everyman, be moderate in everything

Be a model of mediocrity (Rajput online)

Mukta Sambrani (b.1975) in her poem “The Same” poignantly expresses how the growth of a girl child into an adult becomes her life’s biggest tragedy as:

This is the same woman

as the girl in the picture, mister

Only a little older

her mother has slapped her cheeks flat

…someone has had her dreams

someone has had her stories.

This is the same woman, mister,

The girl child in the picture.

This is the same. (Naik, 2001:192)

She presents the theme of womanhood and all that it spells through her work *The Woman in this Room isn’t Lonely* (1997). She also depicts the life of urban women and their struggles in day-to-day life through it.

To conclude, we may say, in the modern times, poetry has evolved as an honest mirror of the tradition-bound societies and literary subversions. The modern women poets sketch the hostile social conditions, numerous hindrances and inhibitions imposed upon them. They also specify the exploitation of women, and expose their bleeding heart and soul by virtue of their femininity and sensitivity. Their poetry progresses towards realism, transparency and radicalism and crosses patriarchal norms in order to define itself. The Indian women poets who wrote after Kamala Das have used a wider focus and greater sophistication in their verse. As it is the prime duty of writers to arouse public consciousness, they have used their poetry as the charter of social reform in the interest of suppressed and subjugated Indian womanhood.