Chapter Two

Feminism and Women’s Writing in India

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explore the history of feminism as a movement that has influenced feminist criticism to evolve as a tool for analyzing women’s writing around the world and connecting it with the influence it has had on women’s writing in India and more importantly to women’s writing in the North-East that will be dealt with in the succeeding chapter. The chapter begins with a discussion on what feminism is and how it is articulated around the world. A brief study of the origin and growth of the feminist movement from its very beginnings to the contemporary times is included ending it in a discussion of its influence on women’s writing in India. These discussions are included in the chapter to put my research into its proper perspective and iterate the necessity of supplementing my study of select works of women writers from North-East India and their feminist concerns and experiences.

Simone de Beauvoir formulation in The Second Sex (1973): “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” establishes that gender is a cultural construct. A notion that reappears in Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind (2011) where Yuval Noah Harari talks about the unfortunate reality of human societies, past and present, relying on a structure of “imagined hierarchies” and “unjust discrimination” to function – the hierarchies in human societies that differentiate the rich from the poor, the free persons from slaves, the blacks from the whites, and so on. These stratified levels of structure found in human societies Harari claims is purely “fictitious” and not a given. The “shared imagination” of an “imagined order” (unique to human societies) is also responsible for the most conspicuous of hierarchies – the hierarchy
of gender. Every known society has been divided into men and women. Gender according to most scholars today is a cultural construct that designates a woman to specific feminine duties and roles founded on the foundations of the myths (religious theologies) of the society she lives in (Sapiens149-78).¹

A look at recorded history unveils a narrative that is common in all organized human societies. Women as the ‘second sex’ do not have the same rights and standing as men do. In a historical narrative that has from the very beginning been androcentric, it is only very recently in the twentieth century that women have attained the right to vote and the right to occupy certain positions in the public space that had earlier been exclusively for men. Even in intellectual history, women have been for hundreds of years denied the right to education and fought many up-hill battles to attain these rights. These and more reasons are why the study of narratives from a woman’s perspective is especially important because their experiences have been suppressed and silenced for too long.

The argument of this chapter is accurately encapsulated in Kate Offen words in her essay “Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach” (“DF”):

To speak effectively, we must arrive at some understanding of the term "feminism" that we ourselves can agree on. However, to be truly useful such an understanding cannot be derived exclusively from our own culture; it should reflect the cumulative knowledge we have acquired about the historical development of the critique of and program for socio-political change in the status of women in a variety of cultures. (120; my emphasis)

Prior to entering into any discussion it would be appropriate to explain the context in which the words ‘feminism’ and ‘feminist’ have been used in the chapter. Throughout the chapter, I
use these two words interchangeably to specifically refer to the socio-cultural-political movement in history that aimed and continues to fight for the attainment of equal rights and status for women. Toril Moi in her essay “Feminist, Female, Feminine” establishes that the word ‘feminism’ is a political position, and that the words ‘feminism’ and ‘feminist’ are “political labels” (117). It is in this context that the usage of these two words bears one meaning in the chapter. However, in doing so, it would be suitable to understand what actually distinguishes the two terms and their meanings. ‘Feminism’ is generally understood as referring to the various movements aimed at defending and attaining equal social and economic rights for women (represents the interests of women), on the other hand, ‘feminist’ refers to the individual whose beliefs and activities are committed to the ideas of feminism or a person who espouses feminism (Offen, “DF”122).

2.2 Definition of Feminism

It would not be an exaggeration to state that feminism is perhaps one of the most influential movements to come about in the world in the second half of the twentieth century. Feminism as a movement has been articulated differently in different parts of the world. Simply put, the word ‘feminism’ encompasses a vastly extensive number of social, cultural and political movements and ideologies concerned with gender inequalities and equal rights for women. A composite definition of feminism is that: it is a theory and/or movement concerned with advancing the position of women through such means as achievement of political, legal, or economic rights equal to those granted men.

*The World Book Encyclopaedia* defines feminism as a belief that women should have economic, political and social equality and refers to it as a political movement – a movement sometimes called as Women’s Movement or Women Rights Movement (49). In *The Sceptical Feminist: a Philosophical Enquiry* (1980), Janet Radcliffe Richards defines
feminism as a “movement for the elimination of sex-based injustice.” She recognises that “women suffer from systematic social injustice because of their sex” and thus the essence of feminism is that it is a socio-cultural movement that seeks to emancipate and liberate women from all forms of oppression by the state, by society and by men (Introduction 1-5). Kate Offen offers a well-rounded summation of the definition of feminism in the following words:

Feminism opposes women’s subordination to men in the family and society, along with men’s claims to define what is best for women without consulting them; it thereby offers a frontal challenge to patriarchal thought, social organization, and control mechanisms. It seeks to destroy masculinist hierarchy but not sexual dualism. Feminism is necessarily pro-woman…. Feminism makes claims for a rebalancing between women and men of the social, economic and political power within a given society, on behalf of both sexes in the name of their common humanity, but with respect for their differences … Even so, feminism has been, and remains today, a political challenge to male authority and hierarchy in the most profound sense …. (“DF” 151-52; my emphasis)

However, to put forward an accepted definition for the word feminism is highly problematic. The difficulty is in deciding on a definitive consensus of what the word feminism means among academics and feminist scholars as it has picked up so many connotations throughout its history but one could say that in its broadest sense it is an “intense awareness of identity as a woman, and interest in feminine problems” (Lalhmangaihzuali 5). With all this said and done, it should be established on the outset that it is a troublesome attempt to put forth a unitary concept or a set of core concepts integral to the definition of what feminism is. It seems unsuitable owing to the different strands of feminism and the inherent disconnected and divisive discourses on feminism as a movement and its theoretical
conceptualization and as such it is difficult to construct a concrete definition of what feminism is. Jane Freedman in her book *Feminism: Concepts in the Social Sciences* (2001) discusses the dilemma of the difficulties in arriving at a concrete core concept of the term considering the fragmentary nature of the different strands of feminism:

Any attempt to provide a baseline definition of a common basis of all feminisms may start with the assertion that feminisms concern themselves with women’s inferior position in society and with discrimination encountered by women because of their sex. Furthermore, one could argue that all feminists call for changes in the social, economic, political or cultural order, to reduce and eventually overcome this discrimination against women. Beyond these general assertions, however, it is difficult to come up with any other ‘common ground’ between the different strands of feminism …. (Introduction 1)

Joan Wallach Scott also opines that the fragmented character at conceptualizing feminism acts as a barrier that undermines the “cohesiveness of the community of feminist scholars” (14). However, the very fragmentary nature of it also allows certain flexibility in its accommodation of different concepts. The broad adaptability of the definition of feminism as an ideology or movement “allows feminism to survive the failure of any particular set of theories about the position of women…” imbuing it with a certain “flexible attitude” (Richards 3).

2.3 Origin of the Words ‘Feminism’ and ‘Feminist’

Echoing the words of the great French historian Lucien Febvre that: “It is never a waste of time to study the history of a word,” it is of significance that the historical origin of these words be examined.² The words ‘feminism’ and ‘feminist’ used in contemporary times
throughout the world and understood as ideas associated with the emancipation of women and individuals who support their goals has its origins in nineteenth century French political discourse. These terms originate from the French words féminisme and féministe.3

The word ‘feminism’ is derived from féminisme and is a fairly modern term with historical inquiries into its origins showing that it barely existed before the twentieth century. The coinage of the word féminisme is erroneously widely attributed to the French philosopher and socialist thinker Charles Fourier who recognised, “that the essence of women’s emancipation lay in eradicating their legal and economic subordination to men.” According to Kate Offen in “On the French Origin of the Words Feminism and Feminist” (“FO”), the first usage of the word by Fourier is said to have appeared in 1837 as mentioned in Paul Robert’s Dictionnaire alphabétique el analogique de la langue francaise (1960). Other sources and its citation of the usage of the term and its attribution to Fourier become hazy and indeterminate with further inquiry. The dates of attributed origins vary from 1808 to 1841 (45-46).

The word féministe however has less obscure origins with it seemingly appearing for the first time in 1871 in a French medical text which talked about the feminization of male bodies.4 The term was subsequently popularized, ironically, by the French dramatist Alexander Dumas fils in 1872 in a pamphlet l’homme-femme in which he used it to describe women behaving in a “supposedly masculine way” on the subject of adultery and used the term as a jibe for the then-emerging women’s movement for rights (Freedman 2). The word féministe again reappears in 1882 as a label claimed by French campaigner of women’s suffrage Hubertine Auclert who in a letter to the Prefect of the Seine opposed and criticized marriage laws ( “FO” 47).5
It is significant to observe that the words ‘feminism’ and ‘feminist’ only entered public discourse and lexicon towards the end of the nineteenth century and consolidated in its usage beginning of the twentieth century. In any case it may be noted that long before the word ‘feminist’ was used to ascribe to women’s fight for rights and actions, what we would have called the ‘feminist’ thought had already come into existence and began evolving long before its formal usage.

2.4 The Age of Enlightenment and the Beginnings of Feminism

It is next to impossible to pinpoint the precise moment when the birth of the feminist movement took place because the dawning consciousness to end the disparity between the status of men and women in human society did not transpire from a singularity but occurred as movements across various cultures, countries, class and backgrounds.

The origins of the feminist movement cannot be traced back to a single source or event but the awareness and perception of society’s unfair treatment of women is recognizably present in many historical events like the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, in the drive for Abolition of Slavery, and in the American Civil Rights Movement (Dhawan and Mahto 7-8).

Social movements in human history gave the embers for the awakening of the awareness to bring change to women’s position and status in society. Feminism as a terminology that encapsulates the struggle to attain equal status and rights for women came to life in the throes of social, philosophical and intellectual movements. One movement in history that paved the way for the development of feminist thought was the Age of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century that gave importance to ideals such as the notion of human worth, equal rights, reason, liberty, progress, revolutions in knowledge regarding the sciences and philosophy etc. These ideals were the product of upheavals in political and philosophical thoughts that
ultimately also greatly influenced the beginnings of feminism. June Hannam’s *Feminism* states that the fermenting of “new ideas, political upheavals and economic change” in Europe covering the period of the Enlightenment shaped the development of feminist ideas (1).

When one delves into the history of the Enlightenment, it comes across as a strictly male narrative where women appear merely as subjects or topics of discussions lacking “rationality” and patronizingly relegated to the realms of “feminine domesticity,” so one could ask how the ideals of such a movement in history influence the beginnings of what we know today as feminism and feminist movements? (Carr, Review 831).

The climate for women during the Enlightenment, even though it brought significant changes in western culture and thought as a whole, was one of severe opposition to any changes that would elevate the position of women as equals of men. The general opinion of the time was that the differences between the sexes was not a product of social construct but that these differences were strictly biological in nature which rendered women with lower physical, rational and intellectual capabilities than men. Men were seen as “rational, objective, and scientific in their thinking,” and women as “emotional, sensual, lacking in innate reason and a barrier to social progress” (Hannam 11). Even prominent voices of the period from John Locke to Jean Jacques Rousseau in their treatises on education believed that the education of the sexes could not be one and the same. Men with their rational thinking and natural instinct for independence should be educated for roles in public life and the politics whereas women and their education should be designed for their domestic role. These texts clearly demarcated the place of women to feminine domesticities.

These opinions on the place of women in society, however, did not go unchallenged as there was also a deluge of novels, articles, treatises and pamphlets starting from the mid-eighteenth
century that offered alternative views on education, politics and marriage from a woman’s perspective (Hannam 12).

Variables in the roles and position of women in society occurred depending on their class, rank, background and education in a movement that spanned across Europe. Western Europe at the time of the Enlightenment was witnessing turbulent times politically and this led to men and women becoming “politicized” (Bryson 8). The period that spanned the Enlightenment from the late seventeenth and the nineteenth century brought about intense discussions on gender, women, slavery and colonialism, and these intellectual cauldrons of discussions sparked equally animated responses to texts that instructed and preached on female morality and rationality. These intellectual debates and counter-arguments created the right conditions for feminist thought and consciousness to take hold.

In studying the history of the Enlightenment it is apparent that the works of female intellectuals is largely ignored in its literary canon but this period was not devoid of female intellectual figures that commented and actively participated in the discussions on the political and philosophical debates of the time. There was an emergence of literary circles in England and salons in France where well-educated women from the upper class echelon of society began to band together with the common goal of exerting some influence on the political and cultural life of their time (Hannam 12; Spielvogel 366).  

This is not to say that awareness for negotiating improvement in a woman’s social position was amiss before the Enlightenment. Philosophical debates on the advocacy of rights to equal education and better social positions for women are notions that existed even before the Enlightenment. There were women writers who were stoking the fire of what one could call a feminist consciousness. In England, women intellectuals like Catherine Cockburn protested
against limitations put upon her gender in her writings and Hannah More was involved with
the literary elite of her time and vigorously participated in the criticism on the slave trade.

A notable name who actively demonstrated a feminist consciousness right before the turn of
the century before the Age of Enlightenment was English playwright and fiction writer,
Aphra Behn, who was ahead of her time by writing progressive views on gender, class and
race. She is famously immortalized in Virginia’s Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) with
the words: “All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn … for
it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds” (62).

Mary Astell’s treatises *Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of their True and
Greatest Interest* (1694) and *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700) are excellent examples
of early feminist texts that engaged the public in philosophical debates on the position of
women in society and the promotion of education for women. Some of Astell’s
contemporaries who were part of the intellectual circle that participated in discussions on
feminist themes include Mary Chudleigh, Judith Drake, Elizabeth Elstob, and Lady Mary
Wortley Montague.

An early feminist of the Enlightenment, whose work and contribution is often overshadowed
by her contemporary Wollstonecraft, was the English historian Catherine Macaulay who was
a vigorous political activist and pamphleteer for rights to education. In her *Letters on
Education* (1790) she argues that boys and girls should be given the same education and that
the differences occurring between the sexes were not the product of nature but caused by
education and environment. She even suggested that the education of boys should include the
learning of “traditional female skills” which was an extremely radical idea for the time
(Bryson 25).
2.4.1 Wollstonecraft and the Birth of Feminist Political Theory

The cornerstone in the foundation of early history of feminist philosophy was laid with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792) which was born out of the ideological and philosophical tenets of the French Revolution (which was itself a product of the Enlightenment). The tumultuous climate of the revolution in France and the debates that it had elicited in Britain on topics regarding human rights, religious authority, representative government, freedom, individuality were incorporated in Wollstonecraft’s argument of translating these ideas into questioning gender relations. Wollstonecraft applied the basic arguments of the Enlightenment such as ‘reason,’ ‘natural rights’ and ‘social contract’ to the idea of the family and women and the private sphere (Duman 75).

Her treatise is a retort to refuting the arguments of leading theorists of the eighteenth century who claimed that women were best suited for domestic roles given their childlike, emotional, and inferior minds that impeded their ability to benefit from formal education or contribute to public service. In particular *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* was a direct challenge to refute the ideas found in Rousseau’s *Emile* (1762) which outlined the biological differences in men and women given by nature and so consequently their education should be as their biological functions and abilities demanded (Bryson 16). Wollstonecraft argued that women too were capable of “rational thinking” and exercising reason and so would benefit from formal education that would equip women to contribute to shaping a new social order where women could also be intellectual companions for their husbands. She viewed education of women as an integral part for the advancement of society as a whole and that women would receive education that matched their social standing (“WfR” 3).
Like many writers of her time Wollstonecraft did not explicitly call for equal rights between men and women. She believed that intellectual capabilities enhanced by formal education would benefit a woman’s different social roles and suggested that motherhood being a woman’s “sphere of expertise” could help her raise children who would contribute to development of the republic (Hannam13). Since Wollstonecraft’s arguments in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* was built along the lines of an “inherently male model of rationality” many critics today consider her as a proto-feminist and not a modern feminist because she maintained that women were naturally suited for lives as wives and mothers (Bryson 18; “WfR” 3).

### 2.4.2 The French Revolution and Early Feminism in Europe

The French Revolution in 1789 stirred new debates across continental Europe and in Britain and added a new dimension to questions on what it meant to be a citizen in the new republic and the opened up the possibility of women to take on political action. *The Declaration of the Rights of Men and the Citizen* (1789) a fundamental document of the French Revolution, influenced by the Enlightenment’s doctrine of natural and universal rights of men, declared that “men are born and remain free and equal in rights” (Anderson 59-61; art. 1). However, this fundamental document of the Revolution failed to address the rights of women and labelled them as “passive citizens”. Even Wollstonecraft surmised that it would be a new “tyranny” if the French revolutionaries did not accommodate the rights of women in the new constitution (Hannam 12-17).

This definition was challenged by the French playwright and political activist, Olympe de Gouges, who in the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen* (1791) called for women to enjoy equal rights as men to participate in the public sphere, and branded the Revolution as a revolution only for men. The Republic of Letters and the Salon culture
became important forums for intellectual exchanges and under the guidance of notable hosts like Louis d’Epinay and Sophie de Condorcet in a way substituted as an informal university.\textsuperscript{10}

This period was not devoid of men who supported the cause of women. French Philosopher Claude Adrien Helvetius argued that men and women had the same intellectual capabilities and that it was a lack of educational opportunities that impeded their progress. He disagreed with that common belief of his time that a woman’s lot was due to her “innate nature and behaviour” (Cattunar 2). An important champion for equal rights for women was the Marquis de Condorcet who in “For the Admission to the Rights of Citizenship for Women” (1790) argued that women are just as able to acquire and analyse concepts as men and that “It was the female state of conditioned and regulated ignorance that engendered inequality …” (Williams 167). Denis Diderot held the same view as Voltaire that “women are capable of all that men are,” he questioned the superiority of men over women and that laws that limited women from public life were not natural laws and spoke up for equal rights for women (Outram 91; Spielvogel 366).

The exclusion of women participating in active citizenship gave rise to many political voices during and after the period of the French Revolution. The revolutionaries however suppressed their growing activism with the introduction the Napoleonic Code in 1804 which cemented the subordination of women and gave full legal powers to men. This framework of laws was also adopted widely throughout Europe in Belgium, Italy, Holland and the German States (Hannam 13).\textsuperscript{11}
2.5 Socialist Influences on Feminism

In the early nineteenth century, interests in social, moral and religious questions led to the questions on women’s rights too. The Unitarian movement and its members were prominent participants in anti-slavery and women’s rights campaigns. Unitarian women’s rights campaigners like Mary Carpenter and Frances Power Cobbe were primarily involved in social reforms which ultimately led them to be active in the women’s movement believing that attaining the vote and legal laws would initiate the social changes they desired. The involvement in anti-slavery campaigns gave women the experience of organizational skills to further develop the then evolving women’s rights movement and encouraged women to “question aspects of their own social position” (Hannam 15).

In the 1820s and 30s utopian socialists in France, Charles Fourier and Henri de Saint-Simon envisioned a society that would rid itself of all inequalities and believed that the emancipation of women also reflected the overall “emancipation” and “liberation” of the general population. They conceived that bringing changes in the structure within the family and the relationship between the sexes were “necessary precondition(s)” for initiating transformation in society (Hannam 16; Bryson 20-22).

2.6 The Waves of Feminism

Feminism in an attempt to distinguish prominent feminist movements in its history is often classified into a series of waves – the ‘first-wave’ feminism covers the period from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century that focused on gaining equal rights for women and in particular the right of suffrage; ‘second-wave’ feminism refers to the highly radicalised feminist movements in the late 1960s to the 1980s that concentrated on righting the inequalities that women faced in the work environment and family, and demanded for women’s sexuality and reproductive rights; ‘third-wave’ feminism refers to the polemical
movements that began in the 1990s to the present which focuses on the “micro-politics” of gender inequalities and reacting to the failures of the earlier waves that failed to include the plight of women of colour and the subaltern women (Freedman 4; Paglia 1-17).

Some landmark events and seminal feminist literary texts are dealt with in detail and elaborated taking care to discuss the important pulses in the waves of feminism and also to serve as an introduction to some critical arguments that will be presented in the course of this chapter.

2.6.1 The Seneca Falls Convention

A momentous event that marked a shifting in the focus of women’s movement from campaigning for social and legal reforms to demanding for women’s suffrage was the first ever women’s rights convention – the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848. The Convention at Seneca Falls, New York, was the direct outcome of the indignation that abolitionist campaigners Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott had experienced at the World Anti-Slavery Convention held in London in 1840. The Stanton and other women delegates were disallowed from full participation in the conference by the male delegates of the Convention citing that it would disturb the peace and some even viewed it as unchristian and unbecoming of British custom (Hannam 17; Freedman 2). An excerpt from the document *History of Woman Suffrage* exhibits the tension and un-welcoming attitude the women delegates faced at the Anti-Slavery Convention:

> The question of woman's right to speak, vote, and serve on committees, not only precipitated the division in the ranks of the American Anti-Slavery Society, in 1840, but it disturbed the peace of the World's Anti-Slavery Convention, held that same year in London. The call for that Convention invited delegates from all Anti-Slavery organizations. Accordingly several American societies saw fit to send women, as
delegates, to represent them in that august assembly. But after going three thousand miles to attend a World's Convention, it was discovered that women formed no part of the constituent elements of the moral world…. The American clergymen who had landed a few days before, had been busily engaged in fanning the English prejudices into active hostility against the admission of these women to the Convention. In every circle of Abolitionists this was the theme, and the discussion grew more bitter, personal, and exasperating every hour. (Stanton, Anthony, and Gage 1: 54)

Against such a hostile backdrop, the Seneca Falls Convention was convened and the treatise *Declaration of Sentiments and Grievances* (1848) by Stanton was delivered. The treatise was closely modelled on the *Declaration of Independence* (1776) and it was called upon American women to organise and petition for their rights. The convention also passed resolutions, one of which declared that: “it is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise,” and it marked the beginning of women’s suffrage movement in America (Stanton 3; res. 9).

It is clear that the motion for women’s emancipation and suffrage in this period was initially set off by a complex network of radical campaigns that aimed to bring changes to property reforms, to advance the rights of workers and anti-slavery movements.

The organised women’s movement was already vibrant in Britain by the 1840s, and its influence spread over to France and Germany, and at later stages in Belgium, Italy, Scandinavia and the Netherlands. The back-bone of these movements were well-educated, middle-class women from varied backgrounds who were pushed to campaign for changes as they recognised the severity of their restrictions and restraining nature of legal laws imposed on their sex. Few individual working women also participated in the movements. The most vocalised demands of these organised movements were access to higher education and
professional employment. It also included feminist concerns for issues pertaining to morality, marital relationships and protection against domestic violence and these issues not only resonated for women activist across Europe and North America, but in places like India too (Hannam 20).

2.6.2 Mill and Bebel: The Woman Question

Towards the late nineteenth century, two texts of great significance to feminist critical theory appeared. These texts offered a framework of ideas for feminists and energised debates on the ‘woman question’ – John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* (1898) and August Bebel’s *Woman and Socialism* (1879). Although progress in terms of the awareness to attain equal rights for women had sparked debates on the subject, mid-nineteenth century Britain had shown no tangible progress since the time of Wollstonecraft in the improvement of women’s condition and status in society. British society continued to adhere to the social theories of “biological determinism” that a women’s place was in the home and its setting, and that women were mentally and physically lesser than men. This was reinforced by patriarchal religious views that held steadfast to the idea that a woman had no place in the public and professional sphere.

Mill’s argument in *The Subjection of Women* was that women’s subordination was not due to biological attributes and determinism, but that it was simply due to “social pressure and faulty education” (Bryson 46). He therefore called for equal opportunities for women, to vote and to hold political offices. Mill’s emphasis on the importance of the individual meant that “individual faculties” should be developed and that this included women and he looked upon marriage as a form of slavery for women.

Mill’s ideas were important points in the history of women’s movements where a man took the precedence to raise debates on the woman question.
Bebel’s text *Woman and Socialism* placed in a different political setting and assumption argued that woman were “doubly disadvantaged” in a capitalist society because not only was she subjected to economic dependence on her husband but was also exploited in the work place. He also adhered to the idea that women’s subordinate position to men was not rooted in biology but in history. His text raised questions on the welfare of women and their issues in socialist circles (Hannam 26).

2.6.3 Virginia Woolf and Feminist Criticism

A pioneer of feminist literary criticism, Woolf’s seminal work *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) raised the issues of “gender politics of literary creation and its consumption” (Goldman 67) and of the social and economic context of women’s writings and most critical of all, she argued for the need to establish a female literary tradition. Delivered as lectures in 1928 at two women’s colleges in Cambridge, the central argument of *A Room of One’s Own* is one of using the metaphor of a “room” to convey that – in order to realise the heights of their creative potential, a woman, must have financial and psychological independence and that: “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (Woolf 2). The statement alone has had huge repercussions and a central idea for feminist criticism.

The metaphor of the “room” is also further extended to the manifesto that Woolf presents in *A Room of One’s Own* – that it can be taken as a clarion for resistance against the appropriation of language, history, representation and tradition set by men for women.

Woolf’s *Three Guineas* (1938), although not a text centred on literary criticism but a feminist text nonetheless, concerns the position of women, especially in relation to the social and political institutions of patriarchy and touches upon the politics of gender (Goldman 70; Habib 671-82).
2.6.4 Beauvoir and *The Second Sex*

Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949) and translated as *The Second Sex* in 1953 laid the groundwork for the emergence of the second-wave feminism by broadening the concerns of the first-wave feminists on equal rights to the issues concerning a woman’s unequal status in the workplace, in matters pertaining to reproductive rights, sexuality, family etc. Beauvoir’s argument that woman is second to man, and perceived as the ‘other’ in a patriarchal society and that an individual is assigned gender identity not by biology or nature but by social constructs was a truly radical idea at the time and resonated deeply for future feminist criticism and the feminist movement.

The book’s central argument is that women have always occupied a subordinate position to men and is always presented in a secondary role in relation to man. She claimed that the “essence” of women constructed at many levels, religious, economic, political, were done solely for the interests of men and that this so-called “essence,” that of maternal and reproductive functions, enslaved women to her subordinate position as the “other.” Beauvoir formulated that the central dilemma of ‘woman’ from recorded history to one that is still relevant today – the problem of reconciling a woman’s productive and reproductive roles and until the reconciliation is achieved, women would always be the other (Habib 682-91).

2.7 Feminist Criticism in the Twentieth Century

Feminist criticism in the twentieth century in a nutshell is an amalgam of the cumulative experiences and struggles of women from the time of the ancients to the Renaissance and through the Enlightenment and the women’s movements in the 1960s which helped develop and broaden its scopes and concerns. Twentieth century feminist criticism concerns itself with tracing and developing female literary traditions and to bring attention to the contributions of women; theories dealing with sexuality and sexual differences; the dynamics
of gender relations and its role in literary creation and reception; criticism on the
representation of women in literature; and a concern with female experience and language in
literature.

Theoretically, feminist criticism tends to overlap with theories on deconstruction,
structuralism, linguistics, Marxism, psycho-analysis etc, this is mainly because feminist
criticism is very broad in its scope and does not have a core set of concepts or ideas to its
framework (Habib 667-68). Peter Barry notes that feminist criticism became much more
“eclectic,” taking on other forms of criticisms in its approaches and analytical findings (117).
The eclectic nature that feminist criticism acquired in the twentieth century is displayed by
the differences in the adoptions of theories that have influenced American, British and French
feminisms and their different approaches to critical theory.

American feminism in the 1960s energized the emergence of the second wave feminism with
the publishing of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) which painted the
grievances of middle-class White American women within their public and domestic spheres.
Other feminist texts were also published at the time that questioned gender inequalities and
the subordinate positions women were put in by a patriarchal society. Some examples are
Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1969) and Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970).
Some feminists focused on the importance of identifying literary texts that perpetuated
female representation and portrayal and gave much emphasis on a close reading of literary
texts in order to encourage the historically neglected female traditions of writing. Some of
these feminists are Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar and Elaine Showalter. Showalter’s *A
Literature of their Own* (1977) is an influential work that attempts to trace important phases
in the history of women’s writing and introduced an important aspect of feminist criticism –
gynocriticism.
Twentieth century British feminism on the other hand has leanings towards Marxism and has a tendency to be “socialist feminist” in its orientation by situating literary texts and feminist concerns within the parameters of the political and ideological context (Barry 119; Habib 671). Key examples are Juliet Mitchell’s *Women’s Estate* (1971) where she probed into patriarchy, the role of women in society and the influence of various liberation movements, and psychoanalytic theories of gender and her latter work, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974) where she again attempts to reconcile the ideas of Marxism and feminism. Michèle Barrett’s *Women’s Oppression Today* (1980) is also an important socialist feminist text.

French feminism in contrast is distinctively theoretical in its approach, relying to a considerable degree on the ideas of Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida. For French feminist critics like Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, the literary text is not merely a representation of reality or just the reproduction of personal experience; it also encompasses language and psychology, revaluing the significance and meaning of the “maternal,” embracing it as “empowering” and not as a source of “oppression” (Habib 669). For Irigaray and Cixous, language could be an important aspect that could be used in challenging the patriarchal system by the woman – by writing in a language of their own and writing herself into the discourse i.e., the *écriture féminine*, a woman reclaim the ‘body’ that had been confiscated from her by patriarchy (Cixous 877-80).

In examining feminism and feminist theory, we are made aware that there are many models of parallel feminisms that span across different countries and cultures. Aside from studying feminism from a purely historical approach, it is also classified into theoretical families. Broadly, feminisms and feminists are classified as follows: Liberal feminism, Marxist or socialist feminism, and Radical feminism. Liberal feminists believe that within the framework of the liberal state and based on its theoretical foundation, should give women
equal citizenship as men such as equal rights and privileges. Marxist or socialist feminists
connect gender inequality and oppression of women to the modes of production and division
of labour within a capitalist system of operation; and radical feminists consider the
subordination of women as a direct result of the system of patriarchy. Aside from these, there
are also other categories of feminisms such as postmodern feminism, psychoanalytical
feminism, black feminism, post-colonial feminism etc (Freedman 5).

2.8 Women’s Writing in India

2.8.1 The Socio-Cultural Situation

Western feminism and feminist literary criticism as a political discourse has influenced
feminist movements in India and literary texts have been produced that address the various
concerns and issues women face that are specific to India and its culture(s) but also on a
larger level identify with the struggles that women face all over the world.

A look at the cultural history of India shows female identity in ancient mythologies, texts and
literature in relation to the male. Even though goddesses and female deities are held in high
esteem, the idealized concept of the woman and real life was very different. Though there are
instances of royal queens and figures in Indian history that stand out as symbols of
empowered women and strength for their time, the situation for the common woman was not
one of privilege or status. Through the medieval times to the invasion of Muslim Invaders,
women were oppressed and subjected to institutions like the Purdah system (Pandey 3).

In India, the cause of women’s fight against oppression and subjugation was taken up by men
such as social reformer Raja Ram Mohan Roy who in the nineteenth century advocated for
the improvement of women’s status in society and his efforts to abolish the practice of Sati
and other age old Hindu traditions that encouraged polygamy and child marriage. The
English educated gentry and British administrators before Independence also sought to end various evil social practices such as female infanticide, restriction of widow remarriage and the rigid caste system in order to improve the status of women. At the same time, with the accessibility of formal and western education for girls and women during the British rule, gave women all over the country an impetus to become aware of their rights and to fight for it.

Many women also played important roles during India’s struggle for freedom from the British rule; some examples are Bhikaji Cama, Annie Besant, and Kasturba Gandhi. Post-Independence, women experienced more freedom and opportunities to get an education which consequently allowed women to enter into spaces that had been previously dominated by men. Women became a significant percentage of the workforce in different sectors and industries and also gained important rights to property and changes in marriage laws. However, in spite of the progress made in women’s status in India, feminism as a movement to gain equal rights for women and addressing gender inequality continues to be relevant in twenty-first century India as there are still high incidences of crimes against women and the presence of social practices such as female infanticide, dowry, child marriage and honour killings are still highly prevalent irrespective of class, caste and background and the opportunities available for women in rural and urban areas vary tremendously.

2.8.2 An Overview of Women’s Writing in India

Feminism in literature is primarily concerned with the nature of female experience and the feminist text allows space for feminist politics to be explored. Feminism in Indian literature is undoubtedly a by-product of western feminist movements, its ideas and concepts. Similar to the earlier male-centric literary traditions in the West where the portrayal of women in literature was through the perspective of men, so was the earliest protagonists and
portrayals of women in India written by men. Realistic women characters were created by writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore in the nineteenth century. Tagore’s *Streer Patra* or *The Wife’s Letter* addressed the issues of caste system, child marriage and patriarchy. Mulk Raj Anand in his novel *Old Woman and the Cow* (1960) portrayed the plight of lower caste Indian women as victims of male aggression and addressed social taboos (Pandey 17). The writings of men and their portrayal of Indian women acted as social commentaries about the status of women in Indian society and it shed light on the social evils that affected the condition and treatment of women in India. At the same time, writing from a male perspective, the image of the Indian woman was idealised. Women became symbols of purity, innocence, passive victims and elevated mother figures. This limited the scope of creating woman characters in fiction that showed the authentic image of woman with flaws, imperfections, primal desires and aspirations that was closer to reality.

A number of factors have contributed to the evolution of women’s writing in India and the feminine consciousness that was awakened in Indian women writers to narrate their experience and the yearning for an identity was stirred up by: the spread of education, the freedom struggle, the Indian independence, employment opportunities and so on. Women’s writing in India evolved to occupy and fill in the spaces left vacant by the lack of feminine voices. It is in their writings that the marginalized ‘other’ in Indian society was given a voice to raise questions on marriage, education, clashes between tradition values and modernity, and identity.

In India, the revolutionary upheavals on the Western part of the world notwithstanding, Indian women had little opportunity to access the ideas of modern feminist thinkers, chiefly due to the peculiar nature of Indian social set up emerging out of its demographic variations
and social and cultural differences. It is only in the middle of the twentieth century, more precisely after the advent of independence in 1947 in India that there emerged a prominent cultural awakening demanding the recognition of the feminine prerogatives, both in the socialistic and naturalistic parameters.

It was only Post-Independence, particularly in the late 1950s and 1960s, that Indian women’s writing in English abundantly revealed a hitherto unravelled feminine psyche, thanks to the spread of awareness and learning in the country. More and more women writers began expressing their opinions articulately against the oppressed social situation they live in. The tone of Indian women’s writing in English, particularly fiction and poetry, gradually revealed a consciousness of alienation, deprivation and a quest for a new identity for women. These writings, with their vibrant presence in the Indian literary scenario, are living evidences of the Indian woman’s modern temperament, a rapid growth in their awareness, and the resultant urgency revealed in re-writing the man-woman interpersonal relationships in their typical Indian political, ethical, and socio-cultural background settings.

Denied opportunities available in society, Indian women in the past were smothered with the pressures of traditional values and forced to oblige with early marriage system in Hindus and the Purdah system in Muslims which confined them within the limits of their home. Her identity was deeply entrenched and rooted within the family and the familial unit but with the advent of English education and reforms there was a considerable change in attitudes towards female education and empowerment. In the wake of Independence, a thirst for knowledge and a yearning for a new identity were stirred up and in those transitional phases Indian women had to encounter the clash between tradition and modernity. The difficulties of adjustment between the time-honoured values and personal fulfilment generally resulted in conflict and
frustration. These conflicts and questions raised can be seen in the works of early women novelists of the nineteenth century (Khrishnaiah 17-22).

The initial phase of women’s writing in English were predominantly romantic and sentimental in its treatment of certain subjects but also displayed a didactic nature. This is seen in the writings of Toru Dutt and Krupabai Satthianandan who exposed the crippling discriminations and conditions of women in a male-dominated patriarchal Indian society. At a time when a woman’s freedom in the home and public was severely restricted and constrained by deeply embedded traditional beliefs, the writings of Dutt and Satthianandan, and their contemporaries acted as mirrors and reflected the situation of women at the time in India.

These initial writings paved the way for a new generation of women novelists in the twentieth century who have successfully carved out a niche for themselves in the genre in the transitional scenario of post-colonial Indian society. The women writers of the recent past have brought significant shifts in the reconstruction of lives of men and women in their work using the narrative devices that allow silences, gaps and breaches in the social relations to render a new impression and perspective on experiences.

The period of writing that followed in the 1950s and 1960s witnessed the emergence of minor and major fiction women writers who chronicled the transitional stages of Indian society where changes were rapidly emerging and conflicts in reconciling the values of the past with the present and forays into socio-political spaces were important themes in their writings. There was also a creative exploration into different narrative techniques that exposed the psyche of the characters created by women writers. Some examples of these transitional women writers are Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal.
A look at Kamala Markandaya’s fiction betrays the fact that she was deeply conscious of her role as a woman writer and she acted as an analyst searching into women’s roles in Indian society, underlining the traditional attitude towards women. She portrays her women characters in relation to the historical, cultural, political and sociological environment of a changing India. Showing a deep concern about the problems being faced by women in male dominated Indian society, her women have their roots in the traditional social values, yet they also show their protest against them and strive for freedom.

Ruth Prawar Jhabvala, another prominent woman novelist deals with woman problems by presenting the life of middle-class urban people in many of her novels. What Ruth Prawar Jhabvala presents in her novels are the problems faced by Indian women who have undergone the impact of western culture. These educated women try to assert their individuality and identity as they make an attempt to lead a liberal life but ultimately succumb to the pressures mounted on them by traditional parents and a traditional society.

Feminist writings gained momentum in the 1980s with the emergence of diverse new women writers who were conscious of their position and raised a voice against exploitation and subjugation by displaying a feminine sensibility in their fiction. Feminism echoed in Indian English fiction; the existential struggle to establish one’s identity, to assert one’s individuality and the fight to exist as a separate identity were issues raised in the novels of Indian women writers like Kamala Das, Rama Mehta, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur and Namita Gokhale and this is also reflected in the works of succeeding women novelists like Shobha De, Gita Mehta, Githa Hariharan and others.

During the 1970s and 1980s, writers like Kamala Das, Bharati Mukherjee, Jai Nimbkar, Uma Vasudeva, Sashi Deshpande and others started questioning the sexual exploitation of women, the quest for identity and assertion for women’s freedom. Identity seeking and the search for
an identity is a central thread of thematic concern that is found in the fiction of women writers. Many characters are on a perpetual quest to assert individuality and an identity apart from the one already prescribed by society (Khrishnaiah 23-80).

The novels written in the recent past sheds light on the female psyche and presents a full range of feminine experience. Fiction published in the recent past reflect how women writers attempted to portray their protagonists as modern women who attempt to assert their individuality consolidating their position by shedding off their servile approach towards men. They probe into the human relations and their understanding of the day-to-day problems and deal with various themes of conflict between tradition and modernity, identity crisis of their protagonists, the East-West clash, woman’s struggle for independence, freedom struggle, and the gender inequalities in the contemporary India in the modern and postmodern context. In most of their novels they attempt to liberate women from the age-old male domination.

Women’s writing in India reflects not only the social reality but also shapes the complex ways in which men and women organize themselves – their personal relationships and their perception of the socio-cultural reality. It is undeniable that women’s writing in India is influenced and coloured by Western feminist ideas and concepts and is created by minds that have a feminine consciousness and awareness to better the situation of Indian women in general and also throw light on questions of female identity, cross-cultural conflict, self-realisation, alienation, gender discrimination, gender expectations, societal and patriarchal oppressions.

At the same time, there are undoubtedly spaces that women’s writing in India has not fully explored. Even though a woman writer maybe Euro-centric in her vision of literary expression, she is yet to truly break free from the conventional mould of creating female characters that possess genuine freedom and empowerment – characters that are emancipated
and truly modern. Nor do they offer a radical solution or alternative solution for the resolution of a character’s emancipation (Shaheen 261-63). This may add strength to the argument that women’s writing in India is still in its initial phase of feminism in terms of where the goals and objectives of women writers are still muddled and not clearly defined. This may be achieved when women’s writings can safely negotiate a satisfactory balance in reflecting its heritage of Euro-centric feminism and at the same time developing a framework that is tailored for applying in the Indian context.

2.9 Conclusion

Feminism has been one of the most influential and powerful movements to have occurred in human history. Women have a shared history as the ‘other’ and as second class citizens having to exist as chattel and the property of men in most societies. Since time immemorial, women have been discriminated against, deprived of education and financial independence, and to struggle against a male ideology that has endeavoured to silence their voices. Feminism as a movement has provided women the platform to demand for equal rights and to bring an end to inequalities and discriminations. It is also through the pioneering intellectual contributions of women and the organized movements by women through eventful periods in history during the Renaissance, Enlightenment, French Revolution, Anti-Slavery movement, and Suffragette has moulded and given direction to feminism as a movement that is still very relevant today.

The writings of Astell, Wollstonecraft, Mills, Woolf, Beauvoir, Friedan, Showalter, Walker and others have created the backbone of modern twentieth century feminist criticism. Important literary figures in history from Behn, Jane Austen, the Brontës, and George Eliot have contributed to the establishment of a female literary tradition.
Feminism as a movement has also influenced the lives of women in India by bringing awareness to the discriminated status that Indian women occupied in society. Availing western education and exposure to feminist ideas has given them the impetus to express and articulate their experiences through their writings. The movement has given the impetus for women in India to convey their gendered experiences. The ideas seeded within this movement have also reached corners of the country that ordinarily does not get adequate exposure and attention in the mainstream. This is true in the case of writings of women that are emerging from the North-East region of India – the influence of feminism and its ideas to discuss and analyze a growing band of female writers who are also conveying their gendered experiences as their counterparts in the rest of India – this notion is explored in the following chapter.
Notes

1. Here I use Harari’s definition of myth as a religious theology namely Christian theology that gives us our concepts of what we deem natural and unnatural in the context of how men and women should behave and function – that the human body is created by God for specific biological purposes and should be used in the “natural” manner as God intended, see Harari 165.

2. Febvre is best known for his novel approach to the study of history and emphasized his application to a comprehensive understanding of society. For a detailed reading of his works consisting of valuable selection of essays and reviews written between 1930 and 1950, see Burke.

3. Even though the term féminisme is credited as Charles Fourier’s invention, an investigation into the earliest origins and derivatives of the term are obscure and the use of the term does not appear in any of Fourier’s writings but was attributed to him in various sources of dictionaries and encyclopaedias subsequently. The term féministe however, has less obscure origins. For a complete study on the subject, see Offen “FO” 45-51.

4. According to Geneviève Fraisse, historian of French feminist thought, the use of the word ‘feminism’ in medical terminology was associated with the condition of the under development of male characteristics and sexual organs and hence the use of the word ‘feminization’. Whereas in political terms it is used to describe the virilization of women. See Freedman.

5. Auclert campaigned tirelessly for changes to marriage laws and the right to run for public office. In a letter addressed to the Prefect of Seine (a department of France that encompassed Paris and its immediate suburbs) published in a newspaper, she criticized impositions that the Prefect had laid on civil marriage ceremonies. In it she used the word
‘féministes’ to address the right to oppose marriage laws, for detailed reading see Offen “FO”.

6. The Age of Enlightenment or the Age of Reason was an intellectual movement that spanned over a century and a half in Europe that advocated rational and scientific approach in seeking objective truth in matters of religious, social, political and economic systems. This age truly marks the beginning of feminist history as there was a tide of publications by women writers and intellectuals who began commenting on the politics of the time, the system of education and women’s position in the public sphere. For further reading on the influence of the enlightenment on early feminist history, see Bryson 5-16.

7. The salon culture during the Enlightenment was a social and intellectual gathering of people, usually in the home of a well-known intellectual figure, where discussions on art, philosophy, politics, cultural trends, literature were conducted. Salons were primarily a Parisian culture but were also popular in eighteenth century England and continental Europe. For more on this see “WfR” 2-3.

8. Behn’s reputation as one of the earliest feminist literary figures when studying the history of feminism lies in her work Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave (1688), also considered as important text in the history of the novel, which explored the issues of gender disparity, class and racism. It is one of the first works at the time that a woman had tackled and explored themes and issues that were considered to be the domain of men. Behn was also one of the first women to earn her living by writing, a precedent move at the time. One can say that through her works and actions, Behn laid down the first foundations of what we would later come to call as ‘feminist consciousness’ and has served as an inspiration for later generations of women authors.
9. Scholars and critics argue that Wollstonecraft’s treatise on women’s education and function in a new social order places her thoughts and ideas as a proto-feminist – her ideas, according to them, anticipate feminism and modern feminist thought as such terms were unknown prior to the twentieth century. Wollstonecraft’s arguments are also placed in the Liberal Feminism thought tradition, see Manly 46-65.

10. The Republic of Letters was in the late seventeenth and eighteenth century, a forum for a learned community of men and women seeking to exchange ideas of the Enlightenment that spanned across Europe and America. It was a significant in that it helped women foray into the academic world at a time when the idea of a woman writing and publishing was severely restricted.

11. For a comprehensive reading about the Napoleonic Code, see Smith.

12. The term was used by Marx and Engels to refer to those who believed that demonstrating the rationality and desirability of reforms could initiate social change and in doing so could replace competitive capitalist society, see Bryson 20.

13. Biological determinism is the idea that human behaviour is determined by their genes and biological attributes – that biology is destiny. Biological determinists held the view that biological “facts” determined behavioural differences between men and women, and that “metabolic states” of women rendered them uninterested in politics and this argument was used to withhold granting political rights to women in the nineteenth century. For more on this complex subject, see Mikkola.

14. Term coined by Elaine Showalter to refer to a critical literary framework that aimed to analyse the literature written by female authors.
15. *Écriture féminine* was coined by Cixous in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” as a theory which puts forward the idea that women should write about the ‘self’ and that language was a means of understanding that self.
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