CHAPTER – II

CONCEPT OF FEMINISM IN LITERATURE
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The term ‘feminism’ was derived from the Latin word ‘Femina’ meaning ‘woman’ and was first used with regard to the issues of equality and Women’s Rights Movement. Ever since antiquity, there have been women fighting to free their half of the total population of the world from male oppression. Feminism is neither a fad nor a logical extension of the civil rights movement, but the protest against the legal, economic and social restrictions on the basic rights of women which have existed throughout history and in all civilizations. Naturally, the principles of feminism have been articulated long ago.

The definition of the term ‘feminism’ differs from person to person. Chaman Nahal in his article, “Feminism in English Fiction”, defines feminism as “a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependencesyndrome. There is a dependence syndrome: whether it is the husband or the father or the community or whether it is a religious group, ethnic group. When women free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materialises.”¹ Simone de Beauvoir notes:

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.²
According to her, women are considered secondary in relation to men from the ancient time. It is not necessity of feminine feature but it is the result of education and social tradition under the control of men. Women’s dignity failed but they stand on the same ground of intellectual and professional equality. This has given rise to social evils also.

Feminism is a movement influenced by the ideas postulated, popularized and precipitated by thinkers and authors like Alice Walker, Naomi Littlebear, Judith Felterbey, Michele Wallace, Lillian Smith, Elaine Showalter, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett and others. It is a modern movement expressing protest against the male domination. It provides strategies for change. The aim of feminist is to understand women’s oppression keeping in mind race, gender, class and sexual preference.

God created human beings and divided them into man and woman, with a few basic differences in body and mind, and introduced an element of irresistible attraction between the two sexes to help the process of procreation and survival of the species. The question of man-woman relationship did not exist in the barbaric age. It was only with the dawn of civilization, when men began to live in groups, and latter formed families, first matriarchal and then patriarchal, that the question arose, primarily to determine the fatherhood of every newborn baby. It was the invention of the institution of marriage that sowed the seed of slavery for women. Manu, the law-giver, sanctified this slavery when he ruled in Manusmrti Woman is not entitled to freedom.
While the transition from barbarism to social life had its advantages, it also compelled the individual to repress his instinctual behaviour and thereby to minimize the chances of his life pleasurable. Such repression is all the more severe in the rigid, tradition-bound society of India. The resultant suffering is also shared more by women in India, because the social norms and moral codes of India are particularly disadvantageous to women.

Manu’s ruling was centuries ago in prehistoric times and the slave-status of woman continued unabated for hundreds of years, nay, it assumed aggravated dimensions. So much so that the famous poet vidyapati sang in despair in the early fifteenth century:

Let no one be born.  
But if one must  
Let no one be a girl.  
If one must be a girl  
Then may she never fall in love,  
If she must fall in love,  
Free her from her family.³

It is easy and convenient to blame Manu to initiate the subjugation of women, but presumably the process of loss of women's freedom must have started earlier than Manu's time so as to induce him to codify such subjugation. The process must also have been global wherever men underwent the transition from primitive to civilized tribes; only in India its codification took place first. But the process, encouraged by
Manu’s law, accelerated in India. Some of worst consequences of the steady erosion of the social status of women were marrying off girls at a very tender age, barring women from religious rituals, and prohibiting widow-remarriage.

The next big blow to women in India came in the shape of invasion. So long as the invaders planned only to plunder and ravage and go away, they could not create any lasting influence on the mode of living of the Indian society. But when the Moghuls came, not merely as invaders, but also as conquerors and rulers of automatically brought the Muslim system of which was the Pardah system, which must have taken the Ghunght system among the Hindus. Whatever the historical and other reasons for the introduction and enforcement of the Pardah or Ghunght system for women, there is little room for doubt that the system is cruel to women and has been a major factor in keeping a majority of Indian women illiterate and backward. Any attempt at slackening the system, not to mention it’s strongly opposed by the orthodox people, mostly men, in the name of religious and social order.

The downfall of woman in India steadily continued till at the end of the nineteenth century, women’s position was no better than that of cattel. Under the influence of the British rule and the education system introduced by them, however, the situation started taking a turn for the better. The first impetus for reform appeared in the middle class of Kolkata, which was then the capital of British India. Their main attack was primarily on the customs of child-marriage, Pardah and Sati. The leaders of the movement for reforms included Raja Rammohan Ray, who founded the Brahmo-Samaj, a reform sect of Hinduism, and such other men who were genuinely
troubled by the wretched condition of women. Women also started acquiring literacy due to their efforts.

The literate middle-class women were in the forefront of women’s participation in the nationalist movement, which appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century. Women’s liberation was a part of this movement. Women’s organizations also appeared on the scene. It was, however, Mahatma Gandhi who invited the women as a class to participate on a massive scale in his struggle for Independence that he launched as a civil disobedience movement in 1930. Jawaharlal Nehru writes in his Discovery of India:

Most of us menfolk were in prison. And then a remarkable thing happened. Our women came to the front and took charge of the struggle. Women had always been there, of course, but now there was an avalanche of them, which took not only the British Government but their own menfolk by surprise. Here were these women, women of the upper or middle classes, leading sheltered lives in their homes - peasant women, working-class women, rich women -pouring out in their tens of thousands in defiance of government order. ...It was not only that display of courage and daring, but what was even more surprising was the organizational power they showed.
Elisabeth Bumiller states:

*The women had been in large part inspired by Mahatma Gandhi,* who saw women as autonomous, independent people, and also as an important social base for the movement. No man before or since has done so much for women’s rights in India.\(^5\)

It must however, be emphasized that despite whatever has been achieved during the past more than a century, and despite 53 years of Independence, women’s plight in India in general is far from satisfactory even today. Child-marriages in hundreds are performed every year, thousands of young girl are married away by their parents again their will, hundreds of brides are burnt alive by their in-laws because they don't bring enough dowry, and even the custom of *Sati* raises its ugly head now and then, as the incident of Rupkunvar a few years back shows.

The woman, as a member of the family, has been protected by the father when unmarried, by the husband after marriage and by her own ill old at Such family system makes a woman's life apparently safe and smooth, but in reality it makes her totally dependent and slavish, Spread of education among girls has provided an awakening and a craving for independence and self-reliance, which has resulted in a struggle to free themselves from the protectoral shell of men. This has given rise to feminism and movement s like Women's Liberation. The hankering for independence has also led to some odd consequences. A section of women, far too zealous than others, look upon even the natural womanly instincts as undesirable, leading to dependence on men. They forget the basic fact that men and women are both mutually
dependent on each other. Of course, a woman, as a person, can always aspire to be a free, self-supporting, self-satisfied being. The trouble in our society arises when men refuse to view women as persons and insist on their being women only.

The battle for equality for women with men is long and arduous, and it seems as if it has just begun in earnest in India. Men are bound to try every trick to ensure perpetuation of their age-old superiority and dominance over women. That with a sizable number of eminent women leaders striving hard, for last several years, to get a one-third reservation of seats in Parliament and Assemblies in India for women, they have not yet succeeded in getting even a draft bill introduced in Parliament, is in itself ample proof of total unwillingness to permit women’s progress towards equality. Women have still to face, to contend with, to be victims of, outdated and outmoded positively anti-women laws and customs regarding marriage, divorce, dowry, inheritance, abortion, rape, etc. While social progress in general and enlightened women’s efforts in particular have succeeded in bringing about some desirable changes in such laws and customs, still much remains to be achieved in this direction. It appears women’s rights are nowhere in sight in their fullest fulfilment and will not be for at least a few decades more. What they have silently suffered for centuries - the humiliation, the dependence and the resignation to ill-fate - have penetrated the psychology of majority of women, illiterate as well as literate, so deep as to need tremendous spadework from all reformers, before women’s emancipation becomes a reality.

Unfortunately in India, women still seem to lack a firm will for independence. Most of them, even educated ones, are quite content to have a home
with a good husband and children. They have little attraction for a public career or even for a little economic independence. In fact, we witness hundreds of women in India leaving their public careers for good or kicking their good jobs or professions in order to settle down to a "happy married life". The idea of a self-supporting career is not perhaps in the blood of the Indian woman. "Career" to them is always secondary to "home". It is no wonder, therefore, that in spite of spread of education among women in India, we do not find a proportionate rise in the number of women in public life, in professions, in higher jobs.

Women’s pitiable plight in the Indian family, their inferior social position, their lack of freedom, etc., are topics which have interested me for a long time now. The causes of women’s woe have occupied my thoughts and have kept me wondering. It would seem that as soon as human beings became civilized and formed villages, taking up agriculture, man assumed a superior role. Man became the bread-earner and woman the bread-maker confined to the kitchen. This relegation of women to secondary roles is not confined to India, but is a worldwide phenomenon as societies evolved.

Every action has its reaction and so this repression of women was bound to have sooner or later its reaction in revolution, and we find it in the forms of feminism and Women’s Liberation movement. Viewed in worldwide context, the initiative was no doubt taken by the West, but India cannot be said to have lagged far behind. Even in the West feminism did not appear before the last quarter of the nineteenth century. When a society starts taking cognizance of a problem, its literature cannot fail to reflect it. So the Indian English fiction too has not remained unaffected and the Indian
writers in English have taken up the task of challenging the age-old superiority of men over women and of asserting women’s equality and freedom. The method may differ from writer to writer. A woman protagonist in a novel may question the accepted values and raise her voice of protest against the existing moral codes or social norms that are prejudicial to women. The heroines in Gita Mehta’s novels refuse to toe the line and try to find their own meaning and value of life.

‘Feminism’ is an umbrella term for a range of views about injustices against women. There are disagreements among feminists about the nature of justice in general and the nature of sexism, in particular, the specific kinds of injustice or wrong women suffer; and the group who should be the primary focus of feminist efforts. Nonetheless, feminists are committed to bringing about social change to end injustice against women, in particular, injustice against women as women.

In an effort to suggest a schematic account of feminism, Susan James characterizes feminism as follows:

_Feminism is grounded on the belief that women are oppressed or disadvantaged by comparison with men, and that their oppression is in some way illegitimate or unjustified. Under the umbrella of this general characterization there are, however, many interpretations of women and their oppression, so that it is a mistake to think of feminism as a single philosophical doctrine, or as implying an agreed political program._
James seems here to be using the notions of “oppression” and “disadvantage”
as placeholders for more substantive accounts of injustice (both normative and
descriptive) over which feminists disagree.

Today, the concept of gender has become a debatable issue in our society and
an important dimension in the analysis and the design of social and economic policies.
Nowadays, development is considered not only in terms of increased welfare, but also
in terms of the sustainability dimension. This means that in the development process,
we cannot undermine the resources of coming generations. Included in these resources
are the lives of men and women. In this respect, sustainability and equality are
intrinsically related. There can be no sustainability if half the world's population are
deprived and dispossessed of livelihood resources. Women's rights as indivisible and
unalienable human rights, including their personal, economic, political and all other
rights are, therefore, a developmental issue of crucial importance. As Elizabeth
Spelman makes the point:

...no woman is subject to any form of oppression simply because
she is a woman; which forms of oppression she is subject to depend
on what “kind” of woman she is. In a world in which a woman
might be subject to racism, classism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, if
she is not so subject it is because of her race, class, religion, sexual
orientation. So it can never be the case that the treatment of a
woman has only to do with her gender and nothing to do with her
class or race.
Feminist theory, which emerged from these feminist movements, aims to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining women's social roles and lived experience; it has developed theories in a variety of disciplines in order to respond to issues such as the social construction of sex and gender. Some of the earlier forms of feminism have been criticized for taking into account only white, middle-class, educated perspectives. This led to the creation of ethnically specific or multiculturalists’ forms of feminism.

Feminist activists campaign for women’s rights – such as in contract law, property, and voting – while also promoting bodily integrity, autonomy, and reproductive rights for women. Feminist campaigns have changed societies, particularly in the West, by achieving women's suffrage, gender neutrality in English, equal pay for women, reproductive rights for women (including access to contraceptive and abortion), and the right to enter into contracts and own property. Feminists have worked to protect women and girls from domestic violence, sexual harassment, and sexual assault. They have also advocated for workplace rights, including maternity leave, and against forms of discrimination against women. Feminism is mainly focused on women's issues, but because feminism seeks gender equality, bell hooks, among other feminists, has argued that men's liberation is a necessary part of feminism, and that men are also harmed by sexism and gender roles.

Feminist theory is the extension of feminism into theoretical or philosophical fields. It encompasses work in a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, economics, women's studies, literary criticism, art
history, psychoanalysis and philosophy. Feminist theory aims to understand gender inequality and focuses on gender politics, power relations, and sexuality. While providing a critique of these social and political relations, much of feminist theory also focuses on the promotion of women's rights and interests. Themes explored in feminist theory include discrimination, stereotyping, objectification (especially sexual objectification), oppression and patriarchy.

Today many people feel that feminism has almost ended because it has nearly won the war at most of the fronts by achieving for women equality with men in all walks of life — political, social, economic etc. But the fact is that the feminist movement is still going quite strong all over the world with the prospects of getting stronger in the near future. The origin of violence against women is seen in the subordination of women in the world. In ‘Manusmriti’, Manu has given secondary place to women. The same thing is reflected in Islam and Christianity. Great thinkers like Aristotle, Rousseau, Hegel, Sartre, Freud and Nietzsche consider women inferior. Simone de Beauvoir writes that,

The situation of woman is that she is a free and autonomous being like all human creatures nevertheless finds her living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other.

Two of the most important works of contemporary feminist theory — Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex and Mary Daly’s Beyond God the Father derive their ideological premise from the twentieth-century philosophical movement, existentialism. This body of ideas was itself rooted in the
theoretical constructs of several German philosophers: Hegel, Hussel and Heidegger, but had its most popular formulation in the works of French thinker Jean-Paul Sartre.

The early editions of *The Oxford English Dictionary* defined feminism as a state of being feminine or womanly as did the 1901 edition of The Dictionary of Philosophy. By 1906, however, the Dictionaire de Philosophie defined feminism as a position favourable to the rights of women. The Webster’s Dictionary defines the term ‘feminism’ as the principle that women should have political rights equal to those of men. Toril Moi says that “The words ‘feminist’ or ‘feminism’ are political labels indicating support for the aims of the new Woman’s Movement which emerged in the late 1960s.” Simone de Beauvoir views in *The Second Sex*, “The terms masculine and feminine are used symmetrically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers.”

Feminism tends to be thought of as a movement of women, and many feminists absolutely reject the idea of allowing men into it. However, men can be as strongly opposed to the injustices from which women suffer as women can. Feminism is not concerned with a group of people it wants to benefit, but with a type of injustice it wants to eliminate, even though on the whole the elimination of that injustice is beneficial to women than men, yet feminism is not just a movement in favour of women, but it is a movement in support against injustice.

Toril Moi has used the term ‘post-feminism’ to cover the different configurations of feminism and post-modernism present today. Present-day
feminist theorists believe that, strictly speaking, feminism is an impossible position. The agonistic definition of feminism sees it as the struggle against all forms of patriarchal and sexist oppression. Such an oppositional definition posits feminism as the necessary resistance to patriarchal power. Logically then the aim of feminism as an emancipatory theory becomes to abolish itself along with its opponent. Feminism is committed to the struggle for equality for women, an effort to make women become like men. But the struggle for equal rights historically and politically emphasizes the value of women as they are. The very argument rests precisely on the fact that women are already as valuable as men are. But in the situation of women’s lack of equal rights, this value must be located as difference, not as equality. Women are of equal human value, when feminism represents the value of women as women, it efficiently counters the systematic devaluation of women under patriarchy.

Julia Kristeva states, A third space for feminism to operate — the space which deconstructs all identity, all binary oppositions. But again indeconstructing patriarchal metaphysics, the risk of deconstructing the very logic that sustains the two forms of feminism — of sameness and difference — cannot be avoided. And so the three ‘spaces’ of feminism are logically and often strategically incompatible.

The post-modern feminists are wary of definitions of any kind. According to Alice Jardine:

*Who and what, then do we mean by “feminist”? That*
word...poses some serious problems. Not that we would want to end up demanding a definition of what feminism is, and therefore, of what one must do, say, and be, if one is to acquire the epithet; dictionary meanings are suffocating, to say the least. 

Jardine writes that; “Feminism is generally understood as a movement from the point of view of, by and for women. She adds feminism as a movement by women which takes on different and very specific forms in different contexts.

The contents of the early feminist theory reflect the declining power of women of rank and the enforced domestication of middle-class women. Yet this theory derived strength from the new powers of education some of these women had at their command. In the 1630s and 1650s, many of the radical English sects supported religious equality for women. In this situation, there were women who liberated themselves from the male authority. In the 19th and the early 20th centuries feminism focused on the acquisition of a few basic political rights and liberty for women. The period from 1920 to 1960 is known as the period of intermission in the history of the women’s rights movement when a sense of self-satisfaction prevailed. For contemporary feminists, different processes of socialization account for a larger part of the observed differences in the behavior of men and women. Today feminists protest against the way the social institutions, supported by cultural values and normative expectations force women into an unreasonably narrow role.
Feminism is a philosophy that fights against such definitions of masculine and feminine, and aims at placing women in a just perspective. However, the term ‘feminism’ must be understood in its broadest sense as referring to an extreme awareness of identity as a woman and interest in feminine problems. Its meaning should not be restricted to the advocacy of women’s rights. Feminism has become an international school. There are different schools like Liberal, Marxist, Socialist, Existentialist and Postmodern etc. These theories cover several aspects of life aiming at women’s liberty.

Feminism appears in various forms such as radical socialist, Marxist, lesbian and so on but at the root, it is basically a concept concerned with the question of identity among women who share similar experiences in life. Traditionally, feminism was a mass movement in the sense that women clamoured for political equality, civil rights, job opportunities etc. Today the movement has assumed an individualistic nature where women demand human rights and personal independence. They are aware of their exploitation, conscious of their rights and willingly compromise with situations.

The term feminism itself demands a broader definition. In a generic way, it has come to mean a movement to support the demand for equal, political and economic rights with men. Feminism does not mean only an awareness of women’s plight but also a determination to change the situation. The treatise ‘Half the Sky’ quotes feminism as The awareness of the women’s position in society as one of disadvantages or inequality compared with that of men and
also a desire to remove those disadvantages.”14 Simone de Beauvoir notes that, the woman is “defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute — she is the other.”15

Man always thinks that he is in the right, while woman is in the wrong; all the negative qualities are assigned to her. He is afraid of feminine competition. De Beauvoir discusses about the topics like sexual initiation, sexual pleasure for women. She states that woman is not a free agent in choosing the man of her erotic destiny. Man is never consistent; he wants his wife to be passionate with him but indifferent to other men as a whole. He wants her to be entirely his. Thus, she is betrayed from the day he marries her. Bound to one man, with children to tend, woman’s life is over. She finds no future other than of her husband’s. De Beauvoir says that the bond between man and woman should be based on common love and consent. She also deals with different issues such as unwanted motherhood, the unmarried mother and abortion. She concludes that women should be freed from the bonds of slavery. Once Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India said, “you can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women.”16 This is perfectly true. Woman of any nation is the mirror to its civilization. If women enjoy good status, it shows that the society has reached a level of maturity and sense of responsibility.

The change in the status of women in India is a slow, steady and continuing process, It began a century and half ago when Raja Rammohan Roy and his
successors and followers focused attention on the social evils. The social status of women in any community is largely dependent on the culture and tradition of the community. In ancient times, Aryans were the main inhabitants of India. These people were mainly Brahmins and they used to give the status of goddess to the women. At that time, the status of women in the households was like ‘Lakshmi’ (Goddess of wealth). A famous Sanskrit shloka signifies the status of women in that age, ‘Yatra naryastu pujyante, ramante tatra devta’ means, the place where women are worshipped, god themselves inhabit that place. Women in that time had place even superior to men. At that time, no religious ritual was supposed to be complete without the presence of the women. One incident of Ramayana is a proof of this as when Lord Rama was performing ‘Ashvamedha Yajna’ at that time his wife Sita was not with him and Rama had used the gold idol of his wife in her absence.

Ancient Indian women had the right to choose their own life partners. The process of choosing the life partner of own choice was known as ‘Swayamvar’ in which grooms assembled at the house of bride and she used to choose the one whom she liked. In Mahabharata, Draupadi’s father arranged for her ‘Swayamvar’ and Arjuna successfully managed to fulfill the conditions and became eligible to marry her. In Ramayana, Sita’s father, Janak Raja arranged for her ‘Swayamvar’ in which kings of different states participated and Lord Rama won her over by breaking the ‘Shiv Dhanusha’. This right was given not only to the princely women but the common women were also given the same rights. In ancient time, women were so important that many of the major battles were fought for them. Women were not just confined to domestic arena but
they were also part of religious teachings.

Medieval India was supposed to be the Dark Age for women. Medieval India saw many foreign conquests, which resulted in the decline in the status of women. At that time the foreign conquerors like Muslims invaded India, they brought their own culture with them. According to them woman was the property of her father, brother or husband and she does not have any right of her own. This has affected Indian people and they also began to treat their own women like this.

One more reason for the decline in the status and freedom of women as that the original Indians wanted to shield their women folk from the barbarous Muslim invaders. These Muslim invaders picked up any woman they wanted and kept her in their ‘harems’. Therefore, to protect those Indian women started using ‘Purdah’ which covers the body. For this reason, they were not allowed to move freely and this led to the further decline in their status. Due to this problem, they began to consider a girl as misery and a burden. They believe that a girl child needs extra care and protection from the eyes of intruders. All this gave rise to some new evils such as Child Marriage, ‘Sati’, ‘Jauhar’ and restriction on girl education.

The decline in the position of women dates back to the period of Manu-Smriti that is 500 B.C. to 1800 A.D. Centuries back while laying down the social codes Manu said: Pita Rakshati Koumare, Bharta Rakshati Yauvane, Rakshanti Sthavire Putra, Na Stree Svetantra Marhati. Manu’s code provided a legal and ideological legitimating for a pattern of social structure which lasted for more than a thousand years.
At that time, male domination had not grown to monstrous proportions. Women were happy under their protective veil and enjoyed their due respect. The birth of daughter which was not a source of anxiety during the Vedic Period became a source of disaster for the father in later Vedic Period. Therefore, it was said that the birth of a son is bliss incarnate while that of a daughter is the root of family misery. But the structure of the society has changed due to different political and social ideologies. Then, women had to come out of their ‘Purdah’ and help their counterpart in fulfilling the social obligations. Apart from the traditional role which was imposed on her, she took up the burden willingly. In this process, she was not appreciated, but insulted, scorned and humiliated. It has been said: “India of the Vedas entertained a respect for women amounting to worship; a fact which we seem little to suspect in Europe when we accuse the extreme East of having denied the dignity of woman, and of having only made her an instrument of pleasure and of passive obedience.” He also said, “What! Here is a civilization, which you cannot deny to be older than your own, which places the woman on a level with the man and gives her an equal place in the family and in society.”

It is strange that ages after Manu made his code, some people in modern India try to defend this primitive barbaric attitude towards women. Manu was no better and no worse than most ancients were in their general attitude towards women. All ancient societies treated women as a property on which the owner had absolute power. In Manu’s code, women are many times equated with slaves who also constituted property. In order to emphasize the low status of women, Manu constantly classifies them with the shudras and slaves.
Then the pre-independence period marked the beginning of awareness of the suffering of women due to oppressive social customs. During this period, a favourable climate was created to improve the status of women through legal reforms. At that time, there were two major movements, which affected the position of women. These were the Social Reform Movement of 19th century and the Nationalist Movement of the 20th century. Both these movements raised the question of equal status for women. The Social Reform Movement has been regarded as a key to the intellectual process that went into the making of modern India. The issues which attracted the attention of the 19th century social reformers were Sati, the ill treatment of widows, the ban on widow remarriage, polygamy, child marriage, denial of property rights and denial of secular education to women. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, M.G. Ranada, D.K. Karve, Rabindranath Tagore, K.C. Sen, Mahatma Phuley, Durgaram, Dayananda Saraswati and others from all parts of the country raised their voice against some of these unjust practices while revivalist believed in reviving the old Vedic society presumed to be the ideal society for women.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy started the first school for the girls in Calcutta in 1825. It was not until the passing of the Hindu Women’s right to Property Act in 1937 that a limited estate was available to the Hindu Widow from her husband’s property, thus freeing her from the dependence of the son and the other relations of her husband. Then, in the constitution of India proclaimed on 26 January 1950, women have equal rights with men. Equality before the law, equality of opportunity for education and employment are all guaranteed as fundamental rights. Thus,
women became citizens of a free country without any discrimination based on sex. In this way, the constitution of India and the legal codes bestowed upon women the privilege of equal rights with men, the same facilities of education, the same opportunities of profession and employment, women have also equal opportunity to participate in the national struggle for freedom under the leadership of Gandhiji. Hence, equality was won by women in the natural course of national development. Before independence, there was discrimination against women in the matter of wages, women receiving always less than men. Nor was there equality of opportunity in employment. But all these pre-independence restrictions regarding opportunities for employment ended because the constitution is clear that there shall be no discrimination based on sex.

Apart from the equality of education and employment, women have the same religious and spiritual freedom as man. The differences between individuals exist only at physical level. There are no spiritual differences between man and woman. The husband and wife are the two sides of the same coin. For this Swami Vivekananda rightly states, “The husband and wife are the two wings of a bird.” And so, a man and woman must work in unison in order to achieve greater harmony in life. Hinduism provides same religious rights and privileges to women as it does to men. Neither is woman superior to man, nor is man superior to woman. Both are “perfect halves to make perfect whole.”

In modern India, the position of women has changed considerably. Her position in modern Indian society is equal to that of men, socially, economically, educationally, politically and legally. Now, she has the
equal right to receive education, inherit and own property, participate in public life and political life of the nation. She has become economically independent as man. She can seek employment anywhere and remains not a domestic slave. Therefore, she is certainly enjoying the equal status with man in all fields of life.

There are so many factors like women’s education; reform movements by many social reformers, women participation in politics and much social legislation are responsible for this change in the status of women. Education of women is considered the most sensitive index of development. In the past, women folk were confined to the four walls of the house. But since the Industrial Revolution in Europe, there was gradual change in the world economy and especially in the outlook of women. After World War II, there were more and more devastations, reconstructions, technological advancements, scientific discoveries and change in the family system, ethical, moral, spiritual values and so on. In the second half of the 20th century, women have emerged in all fields and all walks of life. It is undoubtedly, education which has emancipated women from within the four walls of the home. But the position or status, the restrictions on their role in society, the gender stereotypes, the level of empowerment, the level of gender sensitivity, the amount of emancipation due to modernization; differ from country to country, from state to state, from region to region, and from one religious group to another that leads to problems of varied dimensions.

The status of women in modern India is a sort of a paradox. If on one hand, she is at the peak of the ladder of success, on the other hand she is mutely
suffering the violence afflicted on her by her own family members. As compared with past women in modern times have achieved a lot but in reality, they have to still travel a long way. In the modern times, Indian women were given liberties and rights such as freedom of expression and equality, as well as right to get education. But still today, we are fighting for crisis such as dowry, female infanticide, sex selective abortions, health, domestic violence, malnutrition, sexual exploitation, molestation, rape and even murdered. The sex ratio of India shows that the Indian society is still prejudiced against female. There are 933 females per thousand males in India according to the census of 2001. There are many problems, which women in India have to face daily. These problems have become the part and parcel of life of Indian women and some of them have accepted these problems as their fate.

Today women are educated but illiterate in terms of knowing their rights properly. There is no doubt that women education in India is on an increase, but still it is lagging behind when compared to other countries. Still millions of women are deprived of the basic right to education. We can see a wide gap between the education of men and women in our country. The position of women reflects the cultural attainment of a society. Women’s development is directly related with national development. The education of women has become a worldwide necessity, as half of the world’s population is women.

Thus, women education immensely influences fertility rate, informal morality, population growth, age of marriage, life expectancy, national productivity and also the self-esteem, confidence and equal partnership in all walks of
life. Another harmful practice is the Dowry system where gift of money or valuable things given by the bride’s family to the groom’s at the time of their marriage. If a girl brings large amount of dowry she is given respect and is treated well in her new home and if she does not bring dowry according to expectations then she has to suffer harassment. Women are killed if they bring fewer dowries after marriage. And for this reason, many girls are aborted in the womb itself because many people do not want a girl child, as they cannot pay dowry. Female infanticide is still prevalent in some rural areas. Dowry has been one of the main reasons for female infanticides in India.

Violence against women is a common evil; the level of domestic violence is also high in India. Women are subjected to physical and mental violence; they are not safe anywhere either at home or outside. Every hour a woman is raped in India and every 93 minutes a woman is burnt to death due to dowry problem. There are lots of girls sold to the rich people for satisfying their sexual needs or kidnapped to make them prostitutes. In many rural families, girls and women face nutritional discrimination within the family, and are anemic and malnourished. This nutritional deficiency has two major consequences for women first they become anemic and second they never achieve their full growth, which leads to an unending cycle of undergrowth as malnourished women cannot give birth to a healthy baby. The malnutrition results in poor health of women. Indian women work more than men but their work is hardly recognized as they mainly do unskilled work. In India, a large percentage of women do not have power and they cannot take decisions independently. They have to take permission of male members for each and every issue. They do not
have any right to say in important household matters and not in matter even related to their own life. In this way, women as a whole face a large number of conflicting situations in their life way.

Women of today are assuming different roles besides the role within their homes. They have excelled in each and every field from social work to visiting space station. Urbanization, industrialization, education and employment which are the contributions of socio-economic evolution have provided women with new avenues to express and assert themselves. The changed social milieu along with the new wave of modernization has altered their roles and relationship.

Today there is no arena, which remained unconquered by Indian women. Whether it is politics, sports, entertainment, literature, technology and almost everywhere we can hear applauses for her. Today the law grants immense power to the women. She has the right or equal status in the social, cultural, economic and political fields. The present day society demands more roles for a woman. In our society, at the one end, there are trends of modernization, westernization, and urbanization and at the other, there are traditions, conflicting values, gender stereotype, and differing levels of empowerment. Both positive and negative trends motivate women to emerge out of the homes. As a result, there is either emancipation of women from the bondage of dust to the top position.

Women of India are highly active today in the political area.
Vijayalakshami Pandit, Sarojini Naidu, Sucheta Kriplani were the torchbearers for the women of India. Vijaya Lakshmi Nehru Pandit was an Indian diplomat and politician, sister of Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the first female President of the United Nations General Assembly. She was the first Indian woman to hold a post in the cabinet and thus paving the way for other women. The most important name in the category of women politicians is Mrs. Indira Gandhi. She was the one who made world stop and notice the talent and potential of Indian women. She was the first women Prime Minister of independent India. Today her daughter-in-law Mrs. Sonia Gandhi is following her footsteps and leading the Indian National Congress. Present day, there are so many other women who have made their name in politics of India are Pratibha Patil, the present President of India, Soniya Gandhi, Uma Bharati, Shiela Dixit, Jayalalitha, Mamata Banerjee, Vasundhara Raje and many more. Today Indian women have achieved great laurels for the nation in every sport. Whether it is cricket or hockey India have national women team for every game. Indian women cricket team has won Asia Cup of 2004 and 2005 and made country proud. In India, there are some women sports icons in various games such as Sania Mirza in Tennis, P. T. Usha in Athletics, Diana Edulji in Cricket, Kunjarani Devi and Karnam Malleshwari in Weight Lifting and so on. Today women of India have achieved great prestige in the field of literature. Indo-English literature in the recent past has attracted a widespread interest, both in India and abroad. Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Shobha De, Kiran Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Jhumpa Lahiri are famous names in Indian literature. Arundhati Roy has been awarded with the Booker Prize of 1997 for her work *God of Small Things*. Kiran Desai
has been given Booker Prize of 2006 and Jhumpa Lahiri got recognition in the form of Pulitzer Prize.

The field of art and entertainment is full of Indian women. Today Indian woman is a painter, a singer, a dancer, an actor and a beauty queen. We have many names like Lata Mangeshkar, Indian Nightingale, Asha Bhosle, AnuRadha Podwal, and M.S. Subbulakshmi as famous singers. Madhu Bala, Shreedevi, Madhuri Dixit, Rekha, Rani Mukherjee, Karina & Karishma Kapoor, Aishwarya Rai, Priyanka Chopra and many more as Bollywood queens.

Today Indian women reach at the highest peak in the corporate field. Kiran Majumdar Shaw is the undisputed corporate queen of India. She is the richest Indian woman. She is the MD of Biocon India. She is the wealthiest entrepreneur of India. She wanted to become a doctor but could not get admission in medical colleges but even then, she did not lose courage and went on and on and become corporate queen.

Today there is no field without the entry of women. Of late, women have been accepting many challenging tasks in many fields like engineering, architecture, aeronautical etc. In the present day literary world, there are several great creative women writers in all Indian languages. And many of these writers have taken up issues related to the stations of women in India. If a woman is capable of making a mark in her profession, she should be recognised and treated as an equal. The contemporary woman does not want to conform to
the traditional image anymore. She wants her due, her rightful place alongside her male counterpart in Indian society.

Women in India have been subject to discrimination, sexual exploitation, malnutrition and social taboos since the early 19th century. The emancipation of women was initiated by the Brahmo Samaj and is said to have come a long way especially after India’s independence. But looking at the overall social status of women particularly in the rural and backward areas, one cannot deny that male chauvinism still rules our society. In spite of the tall claims made by people who are at the helm of affairs in our country, women equality is a myth, not reality. Despite our powerful judiciary, the National Women’s Commission, State Women’s Commission and the Human Rights Commission, the crimes against women are continuing unabated. The fair sex continues to be relegated to an inferior social status than men. The declining sex ratio in almost all parts of our country as revealed by recent demographic statistics bear a testimony to the fact that women are neither a preferred sex nor well looked after in our society.

No amount of political sermonising, legal manipulations and official smokescreen has been able to bring equality, justice and respect to women in our male-dominated society. Today they are subject to all sorts of evils and crimes like female foeticide, child marriage, maternal malnutrition, sexual exploitation, molestation, rape and even murder. Her status is always inferior and secondary. The history of mankind has been male-dominated. Women have been used for sensual pleasures. In spite of progress in economics and politics,
women are discriminated. Thousands of married ladies are physically assaulted by their in-laws for dowry demands. It is common knowledge that the perpetrators of crime against women often escape with minor punishments. In many cases, they are not indicted at all due to lack of witnesses or false witnesses that favour criminals.

The progress that has been made in recognising women’s role in our society is limited to the developed, urban areas and emancipated educated women who have the courage to fight against heavy odds. The number of such women is limited. The condition of a vast majority of women, most of which are illiterate; financially dependent on others, in poor health remains miserable. Fortunately, things are changing although at a slow pace. More and more women are engaged in improving their lot through education and employment. A lot many of them are able to reach positions of eminence as doctors, engineers, officials, managers, teachers, lawyers and political leaders. But to bring a radical change in society, due cooperation from males is always necessary.

It is natural that Indo-English writers should dwell in the problem of the cultural transplant’s quest for identity. The confrontation between the East and the West, the strange love hate relationship that exists between the two, the cultural alienation and the loss of identity faced by the expatriates and immigrants are some of the aspects that are presented with a deep insight by writers like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal. Since the beginning of the feminist movement in 1960s in the West, much has been written on women. Only a few feminist writers made their
contribution to the women’s movement against this oppression. Margaret Drabble, Doris Lessing, Iris Murdoch, Marilyn French and Margaret Atwood have contributed greatly in the movement and have been internationally acclaimed as feminist novelists. They announced a rise of a new wave of feminism across the world. Their influence on India resulted in a new breed of Indian feminists. The prominent feminist novelists in the breed are Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Namita Gokhale, Shobha De, R. P. Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya and Arundhati Roy. They occupy prestigious position in Indo-English fiction.

After the gender revolution in 1970s, writing by women about women has become a socio-political act. Women writers feel compelled to justify their fears, tensions, conflicts and observations. With a strong element of protest, like their Western counterparts, Indian women writers have deliberately sought the novel as their medium of expression. Through it, they capsulize the situation of the modern woman. Their writings reflect a variety of shades, colours and visions. The assertion of identity in their writings deserves a better treatment at the hands of their male counterpart. They protested against the cruelty perpetrated on the women by portraying their responses and reactions. The spirit of revolt against mechanical life, mismatched marriages and wayward ways of their life partners was obvious in their writings. The protagonists of their novels are women of a typical Indian society. The plot of their story is woven around the women who negotiate the oppression of a patriarchal society. Subverting social dogmas, ethos, tradition, beliefs and looking at the world from a woman’s point of view, is the crux of new
The characters of these women novelists are bold, courageous and fight for their survival.

The modern novels of 80s paid attention to the miserable plight of the contemporary middle-class, urban Indian woman. They attempted to reconstruct Indian womanhood, which has been characterized as ideally warm, gentle and submissive and the view that women deserved only to be kept in subordination to the male members of the family. Many of the Indian women novelists focus on women’s issues, they have a women’s perspective on the world. The prominent women writers like Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Namita Gokhale, Geeta Mehta, Rama Mehta, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy, Anita Kumar, Meera Syal, Meena Alexander, Manju Kapur and others have distinguished themselves for their boldness in presenting the status of woman in Indian society and for depicting man-woman relationship in fictional form. It is only after the emergence of women writers that we have been able to have a deep insight into the psyche of the Indian female.
Notes and References:-


13. Ibid., p. 15.


19. Ibid., p. 46.

20. Ibid., p. 54.