Chapter II

Feminist Movements: An Introduction

The ‘women’s movement’ of the 1960s was not the start of feminism as is generally held by literary and feminist critics. The ‘women’s movement’ as Julia Kristeva has stated in her article ‘Two Generations’ actually began in the eighteenth century as the struggle of ‘suffragists and existential feminists’. The movement in the 1960s was a renewal of an old tradition of thought and action already having its literature [classic books], which had diagnosed the problems of women’s deplorable state in society and in some cases, outlined a course for the removal of these inequities.

Some eminent ‘first generation’ feminists who took the cause of the emancipation of women include Mary Wollenstonecraft who in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) analyzed the works of male writers such as Milton, Pope and Rousseau, Olive Schreiner who wrote *Women and Labour* (1911), the novelist Virginia Woolf who in her classic book *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) very vividly portrayed the inequalities women face in seeking education and alternatives to marital life, and Simone de Beauvoir whose seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949) is a classic feminist text. The latter told the world that ‘throughout history, women have been reduced to objects for men: ‘woman’ has been constructed as man’s Other, denied the right to her own subjectivity and to responsibility for her own actions’ (Moi 92). Further, according to Beauvoir, ‘women’ have been press ganged by a patriarchal ideology that has assumed all ‘meaning’ to itself, dominating all aspects of social, cultural and political life.

Equally important is how women have ‘internalized’ this
patriarchal vision which is presented as ‘the natural’ thereby condemning themselves to live constantly in a state of ‘in authenticity’ or ‘bad faith’ as Toril Moi observes. Simone de Beauvoir is regarded by many as the greatest feminist theorist of the twentieth century and her criticism of patriarchy and its assumptions is brought out in her famous statement ‘One is not born a woman; one becomes one.’ The feminists of today owe a lot to her in her defining of the woman as a construct. However, a point to be noted is that there were significant male contributions to this tradition of feminist writing, and amongst them worthy to be mentioned are John Stuart Mill and his work The Subjection of Women (1869), and The Origin of The Family (1884) by Friedrich Engels.

The ‘women’s movement’ of the first generation or ‘first phase’ was deeply rooted in the sociopolitical life of nations. Their concerns were political equality and economic parity with men: equal pay for equal work and rejecting the feminine or maternal traits which rendered them incompatible or unequal to men and therefore, ineligible to participate in the making of history of their nations. Their spirited protests brought about changes in personal [abortion rights and contraception] and economic lives of women [equal pay and professional recognition], and according to many these ‘will soon prove to have even more significant effects than those of the Industrial Revolution’ (Moi 184).

The ‘second generation’ feminists are those who sought to implement the programme set out by the founding members of the women’s movement. Julia Kristeva calls this the ‘second phase’ in her essay ‘Two Generations’, and Maggie Humm ‘the second wave’ in her book Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Feminist Criticism. It is associated with women who have come to the fold of feminism since May 1968, and who have brought their aesthetic and psychoanalytic experiences and knowledge with them. A chief characteristic of this phase/wave is the quasi-universal rejection of religion
and a deep distrust of political agitation to achieve goals. The feminist activism
(literary and social) of the second generation still has an allegiance to its
founding members and still talks of a socio-cultural recognition for women,
‘in a qualitative sense’ (Kristeva 187).

The second phase/wave feminism is primarily interested in the
characterizing of feminine psychology and its symbolic manifestations,
seeking a language for their material and inter-subjective experiences,
‘which have been silenced by the cultures of the past’ (Kristeva 187) and
by a patriarchal ‘logic of identification.’ Julia Kristeva notes that as artists
or writers, these feminists have undertaken a veritable exploration of the
‘dynamics of signs’.

The ‘second generation’ feminists were ‘literary’ from the start,
and in this sense they realized the significance of ‘the images of women’
promulgated by literature, and saw it as vital to not only question their
authority but to combat them head on. In this sense, the women’s movement
has always been crucially concerned with books and literature. Therefore,
feminist criticism should not be seen as a diversion from feminism but as
a continuation of the struggle for socio-politico-cultural reorganization
of nations. In a way feminist literary criticism is one of the most practical
ways of influencing everyday conduct and attitude.

In the second half of the 1960s, ‘the notion of origin’ as observed
by Maggie Humm was a key feature of feminist criticism. The critics
worked hard to decipher the significance of authorship of the text. Second
wave feminism of the late 1960s marks a break with the ‘traditionalists’
because critics such as Kate Millet, Germaine Greer and Mary Ellmann
made revisionary readings of what Ellmann calls ‘phallic’ writing. The
focus of critics was in the identification of sexist vocabulary and gender
stereotypes in the works of male authors and ascribing of negative features
like ‘hysteria’ and ‘passivity’ to women and not to men.

A crucial theme in second wave criticism was the idea that literary works represent ‘gender discriminations and inequalities’. They are guilty of stabilizing a patriarchal power structure. For second wave/phase feminism this patriarchal culture is all pervasive and sexist in tone. It begins with a psychological conditioning in the family, and incorporates all economic and cultural structures at the micro (family) and macro (society) level. Kate Millett in her seminal work *Sexual Politics* [1970], calls this ‘ideological indoctrination’ as it works through literature.

These critics observed how in literary works, features of patriarchy like sexual violence, are portrayed not only in character stereotypes but also in symbolic patterns of dominance and subordination. Thus, ‘woman’ is constructed in a stereotype; her social subordination is possible only through association (equating women and passivity). It is further noted that the narrative structures of fiction are conjoined with other cultural structures of patriarchy.

By the 1970s, Ellen Moers and Elaine Showalter had scripted the essentials of ‘gynocriticism’, which celebrated writing by women, for women, with its very own literary expressions and ‘sub-culture’. They also showed women’s literary history as a progressive tradition. They focused on ‘the novel’, which is conventionally regarded as a women’s genre (since novel writing offered the only ‘professional career’ to many nineteenth century women). If literature was to give women a sense of individual and collective significance, then the novel was a likely source of positive images. Further, many feminists, excited at having created a literary genre, began investigating a wider range of styles and conventions. What second wave/phase critics found was these conventions (of literary representations) were as misogynistic as the social conventions on which
literature draws, and they began focusing on these powerful textual affirmations of experiences. Thus, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar built on this retrieval of women’s literary history and, employing psychoanalytic tools, analyzed the themes of ‘the double’ and ‘the domestic’ in nineteenth and twentieth century women’s writings to argue about the ‘existence of the female aesthetic’.

In one decade, feminist criticism unearthed that ‘literature’, far from being a collection of great texts was in reality a collection of sexist ideologies, and women’s writing (gynotexts) offered new ways of understanding these ideologies and remaking of new images for women. The decade also saw the celebration of creative writing and criticism and their fusion in the works of some writers like Alice Walker and Adrienne Rich.

The 1980s and 1990s have been concerned with more substantial questions about literary meaning, which the charting out of a women’s tradition did not solve and the feminist movement of the time employed various poststructuralist discourses to make clear the powerful and sexually expressive relation between men and women’s psyche and language. It can be observed that there are obvious connections between poststructuralism and second wave feminism. This connection is both in terms of chronology and challenges they pose to the bases of language. While the first phase of ‘second wave feminism’ has been called the moment of the ‘resisting reader’ (Fetterley, Millett), poststructuralism marks the high point of the ‘second wave feminism’ by sparking off the debate about ‘essentialism’ and ‘difference’.

Poststructuralist insights encouraged feminists to concentrate on ‘difference’ and explore a great variety of forms of feminity and masculinity in cultural texts. Literary identity was shown to be constantly
changing or always in a state of flux. Signifiers of ‘women’ rarely refer to actual women, as second wave/phase feminists had already proved. Feminists argued that all identities are constructed within ‘systems of difference’. Hence, a general feminist attack on the ‘social construction of gender’ and ‘biological difference’ was strengthened with a poststructuralist questioning of values as universal.

Poststructuralist feminists have questioned the literary value of the establishment of ‘the canon’. To them the great books listed in ‘the canon’ are just another class, race and gender based form of control. Since the canon is too powerful a hierarchy to be undone by attacking or adding a few women writers, feminist poststructuralists have attacked the idea of a ‘unitary literary identity’ (Humm 102).

Feminist poststructuralists have highlighted the processes of literary production (discourse) and the examination of differences of gender. They have taken from Michel Foucault this idea of discourse, according to whom ‘we read and speak only what we are allowed to read or speak since institutions control the formation of discourses.’

‘Discourse’ analysis examines the implications of vocabulary (the term ‘hysteric’ frequently given to obstreperous women) for women and thus, challenges ‘essentialism’ and literary misrepresentations. Further, gender and sexual representations change from era to era not because the physical bodies change, but because ‘political’ authorities change the conventions of representation to maintain their hierarchy.

From the mid 1980s, feminists have been focusing on the differences of colour and sexual preference and creating their own ‘aesthetics’ as the black feminists have tried to do. Similarly, lesbian and queer theorists were recovering lost lesbian writers and critiquing the heterosexism of the literary academy. The prevalent racism and
homophobia shaping literary structures is sought to be exposed by them. Gloria Anzaldua and Gayatri Spivak (1987) focused on the issues of ‘place and displacement’ thus bringing a post-colonial and post-modern perspective in the movement.

As can be glimpsed from the preceding discussion that there are a wide range of positions within the second generation feminists. Though it is beyond the scope of this study to talk about all these positions in great detail, an attempt is made in the following part of this chapter to discuss briefly and clearly some of the links between feminism and different theoretical approaches, especially the more recent ones, excluding the Marxist feminist position which is taken up in some detail elsewhere in this study.

**Myth and Feminist Literary Criticism**: science fiction writing played a major role in feminist thinking of the 1970s. Myths, whether traditional (religious/patriarchal) or classical, often shape the concepts, plots and structures of science fiction novels. Science fiction more than any other kind of literary genre, describes worlds beyond existing politics and history. Literary feminism sees in this a chance to move beyond contemporary political formations in order to transform and humanize society. Like feminism, myths work against the grain of contemporary culture.

At first glance traditional myths seem remarkably ‘anti-woman’. Feminists argue that Greco-Roman myths (European literature abounds with them) are masculine constructs, whose narratives only reflect the anxieties of male psyches. The main project of feminist myth critics is to move away from these ‘constructs’ and find myths that are originally feminine. A case in point is Virginia Woolf’s use of ‘Isis’ from Egyptian mythology to reject the contemporary and patriarchally obsessive Greek
mythology. Further, feminists have argued that mythology can help to reformulate traditional, historical accounts of women’s lives with female centered stories and also redress the huge and distorting impact of many traditional religions on women’s roles.

Myths supposedly speak of human ‘truths’, eternal and even primal, and so they are primarily about power and gender. It is not surprising that feminist thinking in the 1970s was much influenced by myth criticism and science fiction writing, for like them it was also radical, existing beyond time and politics. Shulamith Firestone’s The Dialectic of Sex brought to the attention of readers new ways of organizing reproduction, contraception and child raising. In describing the future reproductive culture, she detailed the kinds of changes in language and power it would bring. Firestone’s vision was radical and utopian. Those feminists who embraced this utopian impulse came to be called cultural feminists.

Thus, we can say that second wave feminism took shape in a utopian mode and as Maggie Humm’s states in her book Practicing Feminist Criticism, ‘cultural feminism’ took shape from this utopian mode. ‘Cultural feminists’ have employed the use of the myth critique more than any other variety of feminists in order to show how women’s identity and literary authority are intertwined.

The aim of feminist myth critics is to attack traditional gender archetypes and reevaluate other mythical representations. Feminist critics focus on alternative narrative images and conventions. It is observed that science fiction is dedicated to rethinking conventional representations of consciousness and social roles, and feminist myth critics use this genre to celebrate the making of ‘a new narrative image and convention’ for women with the purpose of subverting the traditional myth which is androcentric.
Psychoanalytic Feminist Criticism: One of the most distinctive themes of second wave feminism is its attention to female consciousness. Consciousness raising has to do with the nature of feminist perception, for women’s thought processes are different from those of men. Both, psychoanalysts and feminists today examine the nature of relationship of the social construction of ‘women’ and ‘men’ with their mutual and exclusive psychic identifications.

Psychoanalytic theory has joined deconstruction and other areas of second wave/phase feminism to explain literary repression of ‘women’. Feminists have utilized psychoanalysis to subvert and destabilize ‘gendered fixities’, a process which could lead to new cultural representations.

The feminists have employed psychoanalytic insights into understanding gender representations in literature. From a Freudian examination of ‘symbolic representation’ through plot and imagery with its subsequent implications for the reader to the Jungian approach to understanding how dreams are representations of the unconscious mind, psycho feminists have covered a big ground.

A third object-relations approach draws on Nancy Chodorow and Melaine Klein’s thesis who have turned away from the unconscious towards the social and the ‘Pre-Oedipal’ intense infant-mother relationship.

Finally, many have turned to Lacan who argued that linguistic features such as metaphors and metonymy reveal greater degree of psychic desires. Lacan’s psychoanalytic thesis rests on his understanding of the workings of the unconscious as Sigmund Freud theorized, to which he added a new dimension. Lacan stated the unconscious to be ‘the nucleus of our being’ (Ecrits, 1960). Juxtaposing Freud’s ‘dream work’ mechanisms of ‘condensation and displacement’ with linguist Roman Jakobson’s
concept of ‘metaphor and metonymy’, Lacan argued that the unconscious is ‘linguistic in structure.’ His contribution was in correlating ‘metonymy’ with ‘displacement’ where one thing represents another by means of the part standing for the whole and ‘metaphor’ with ‘condensation’ where many things may be compressed into a symbol, just like a metaphor. Fully agreeing with Jakobson’s observations that poetry and literary language are deviations from the ‘norm’ or normal language, Lacan used these linguistic means of self-expression as evidence for his thesis of the unconscious being structured like language.

French feminists are greatly influenced by his characterization of an infant’s development through the three stages of ‘Imaginary, mirror-stage and the Symbolic’. They especially owe to his concepts of the ‘Imaginary’ or the realm where there is no distinction between ‘self and Other’ and the ‘Symbolic’ stage where the child enters the language system, which employs linguistic signs as substitutes for language names. Mindful that this stage also marks the beginning of socialization, with its prohibitions and restraints, associated with the image of the father, they see the Symbolic realm represented in a world of patriarchal order and logic. To protest against this obvious bias in language in favour of the male and break away from this Symbolic harassment many feminists led by Helen Cixous have tried to form a language which is oriented towards the female calling it ‘écriture feminine’ (the term is taken from her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*). ‘For these feminist critics, the literary text is never primarily a representation of reality, or a reproduction of a personal voice expressing the minutiae of personal experience. Indeed the French theorists often deal with concerns other than literature: they write about language, representation, and psychology as such and often travel through detailed treatments of major philosophical issues of this kind before coming to the literary text’ (Barry 125).

Further they use psychoanalysis to discover processes of gender
differences (‘gender perspective and points of view; gender subjectivity [in representations of displacement] and gender absence involving reading’ (Humm 82).), and thereby challenge traditional literary criticism.

Thus, feminism, both as a political movement and as a literary practice, can be said to be analogous to psychoanalysis, for both use a model of repression. Feminists think that ‘women’ are repressed and consciousness-raising of this repressed ‘unconscious’ can be therapeutic as well as instructive into learning about the previously unexpressed effects of patriarchy.

Deconstruction and Feminist Literary Criticism: Amongst the many literary movements of the twentieth century, ‘deconstruction’ has singularly influenced the second wave literary feminism in a most pronounced fashion. Deconstruction calls into question the notion of ‘single meaning’ that a text has, as postulated by the traditional critics. Feminists have employed deconstruction to attack ‘hierarchies of value and single truths’. They have been immensely helped by deconstruction in their project of questioning some forms of knowledge and some claims of objective truths about gender identity. Feminists use deconstructive methodology to subvert patriarchal discourses and knowledge claims.

Employing deconstruction, feminists see ‘Western belief systems’ as totalitarian that privilege ‘the males’ through its dualism or belief in binary oppositions. Finding the logic of these opposing terms (masculine/feminine, rational/intuitive…) is of great interest to the feminists, especially exposing the masculine ‘as a central or transcendent truth’. Since this privileging takes place through a play of ‘signs’ in a text, feminists argue that these ‘literary signs’ can be deconstructed to reveal connections between culture and political beliefs, and how some terms and concepts have been devalued –especially those associated with
the feminine. Patriarchal society, feminist deconstructionists argue, naturalizes values and meanings in culture – which are in turn co-opted and constructed by literature.

Feminism, informed by deconstruction, focuses on linguistic constructions: use of metaphors of gender and binary oppositions (to reinforce a phallocentric masculine perspective), precisely because language is one mechanism by which women have been ‘demeaned’. Since these constructions are quite unrelated to the actual characteristics of women, deconstruction of ‘literary identities and processes’ can make an active contribution to the undermining of social stereotypes. Gayatari Spivak writing in Critical Practice (1980) says that all these concepts are central to feminist deconstructionists and all point to the ways in which women’s representations often throw into relief the hidden patriarchal ideology of a text.

Destabilizing the ‘preferred meanings’ and organized belief systems of literature, looking for ‘slippages’ of meaning, attention to repetition of some ‘master words’ and rhetorical gender statements. Attributing the tendency to privilege speech as part of the Western tradition of logocentricism, feminist deconstructionists have produced not only very sophisticated readings of canonical texts, but also proved the value of many non-canonical texts.

Postmodernism and Feminist Literary Criticism: Postmodernism and its ideas advance existing theories of gender, culture and capitalism. Feminist postmodernists agree that gender constructs are culturally variable and unstable. A major aim of theirs is to explore these cultural constructs both at a ‘high (canonical/classical) and low (popular) levels.’ Since postmodernism per se is against ‘meta narratives’ and their totalizing explanations, feminists inspired by postmodernism pay increased attention
to 'the surface complexity of languages (discourses).'

Feminism and postmodernism both challenge the barriers between the dominant and the marginal (masculine/feminine gender constructions) as well as canonic genres. According to them the meaning of culture is derived both from its processes like canon formation, and from the social contexts in which these processes take place. Both undermine modernism’s (with its tendency of essentialism) and capitalism’s celebration of great artists and ‘the universalization’ of white, middle class masculine values. For both, gender is a historical and shifting construct. As art is not a separate and superior realm of/from life, literary institutions are as much likely to ‘construct’ values as they reflect ‘truths’. Because, the concept of origin, of masculine individualism is questioned, progressive possibilities for women are offered.

Postmodern feminists question the separation of literature from culture because if the meaning of literature exists in its relations to other works of literature and culture, then literature cannot be understood outside the culture that produces it. This ‘textual democracy’, according to Maggie Humms, is attractive to feminists. By intermixing high and low art, and refusing to give grand explanations of literary representations, postmodernist feminists breach the divide between ‘the domestic zone’ (feminine) and the public world of men, so antagonistic to women.

This ‘destabilizing’ of gender representations and constructions help challenge political certainties and make intelligent contemporary culture. According to Meaghan Morris, as observed by her in her work The Pirate’s Fiancée (1988), these ‘gender representations interact with the arts (in highly complex and contradictory ways) and produce and institutionalize cultural languages’ which are derogatory to women.
Demystifying patriarchal reality and institutions is the basic strategy of feminist writers and postmodernism’s greatest contribution to feminism has been the devaluing of great traditions (whether literary or the arts) like the ‘essentializing’ of women by modernism. Feminist postmodernism deliberately undermines principles such as ‘the great masters’, ‘the literary canon’, ‘universal manhood’ in favour of interrelating high with popular culture in terms of gender equality.

Black Feminist Literary Criticism: Black feminism arose as an opposition to Eurocentric, ‘universal’ critical modes of feminism at large. Black women are of the opinion that both criticism and fiction are narratives that represent race in particular ways. Right up to the 1980s, black women were misrepresented or marginalized in most critical texts and literary history. It was observed that writings of Afro-American women are simply absent in black literary histories written by men, which record an exclusively masculine literary tradition. Black feminism exposed the way that the gender conventions of black masculinity work together with white bourgeois society.

Black feminists too insist that gender representations cannot be separated from other features of culture. They showed how black women are triply oppressed: suffering racial, class and gender oppressions whose representations necessitate more complex cultural critiques, opening new cultural possibilities. Black feminism problematizes any ‘essentialist construction of black women’.

Whereas white Western feminists see the institution of patriarchy as their primary oppressor, black feminists see patriarchy together with race, as their oppressors. Black feminists see the making of the case for linking literature and political change far more imperative to their cause.
Barbara Smith gave shape to ‘black aesthetic’ when in her pioneering essay, *Towards a Black Feminist Criticism* (1977), she saw black feminism as autonomous rather than separatist. Further, its criticism would build on ‘simultaneity of discourse’ (Smith). This entailed reading of texts, which focused on the inter-relation of discourses—of race, gender and sexuality.

As black literature interacts with traditional oral stories, as well as with writings and criticism, black feminist criticism is opposed to examining only oral traditional genres. Resisting the temptation of changing or replacing ‘the canon’, black feminists aim to offer new reading practices based on new assumptions about writing. Employing ‘reclamation’ criticism, they widen ‘the canon’ to include black women writers. A second task observed is the eradication of stereotypes attached to ‘black feminity’ by calling attention to cultural history. A far more pressing concern is to address the question of audience and relations between black writers and readers, black or white.

Black feminism offers a multiplicity of responses, cultural and literary, to move beyond a colonial system: whether they are economic or cultural. Black feminist texts organize writing and reading resistances to colonial dominations and misrepresentations and can therefore subvert a white racist history and literature.

**Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism** : In feminism, ‘lesbian aesthetic’ is marked as the ‘coming out’ story. Lesbian feminism arose out of a response to a sense of anxiety at being silenced by a patriarchal culture and a largely heterosexual feminist discourse. Drawing on the work of over two decades of feminist research, lesbian feminists have made major and crucial contributions to feminist theory by investigating ‘cultural constructions of sex and gender’.
Arguing that since all criticism is ideological and reflects a particular cultural construction of historical values, lesbian feminists who were much influenced by black feminism, saw racism in literary and much feminist discourse as indefensible intellectually and thereby decided to expose the double standards. For lesbians as for Afro-American women, inequalities of race and class are sexualized, drawing together the emotional with the political. They dwell on the notion that ‘difference of sexuality’ must surely shape the ‘representation of sexuality’.

Lesbian feminists have devoted themselves to studying how ‘lesbian representations’ and ‘feminine representations’ are different; what part historical construction, self and social censorship, and language have played in the subjection of lesbians. They are of the view that representations of sexuality are constrained by rules of masculine and feminine behaviour, and their principal task is to decode what a dominant heterosexual culture has silenced. For lesbian feminists, ‘lesbian’ is an alternative model of female identity and ‘lesbian feminism’ opposes the constructions imposed by heterosexuality and represents an alternative sexual discourse.

Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* was a landmark study, which offered many suggestive insights into the historical construction of sexuality in the West. He enunciated the discourse, which the lesbian feminists adopted, that any exploration of sexual constructions depends very much on literary critical concerns: on the forms, concepts and vocabulary of texts. Making clear that since there is no one experience and no one language of sexuality, the current definitions of sexuality rest upon culturally specific oppositions (intellect/passion) which do not acknowledge the experiences of lesbians because they are constructed by a heterosexual patriarchy.
The main aim of lesbian feminists is to clarify the ways in which critics can discover a ‘lesbian aesthetic’, incorporate lesbian texts into the new literary history and appreciate lesbian critical principles in feminism and in literary criticism. Another feature of lesbian feminism is an opposition to gender hierarchy: there are no binaries of superior/inferior, male/female.

Lesbian feminism shows that ‘difference’ is both a concept, and something that can be staged in positive alternatives to heterosexual patterns. Literature’s support can be invaluable in transforming ‘sexual politics’ and displacing heterosexist/masculine patterns of meaning making. Lesbian feminist criticism provides the critical strategies, which subvert the traditional literary theory and everyday sexual stereotypes.

Third World Feminist Literary Criticism: Third world feminism questions the construction of a colonial female identity and subjectivity, patriarchal imperialism and domination, the sexual/racial constructions of imperialism and the impact of all of these on literary conventions and forms. The influence of Edward Said’s Orientalism and post-colonialist discourse has had a major influence in the inauguration and development of ‘third world feminisms’.

A major feature of third world feminism is the unearthing of the link between patriarchal and imperialist ideas. At the heart of the patriarchal –imperialist project is what third world feminists see as the fundamental hostility to, and fear of, ‘others’, particularly ‘female others’. Further, the third world feminist’s exploration of binary oppositions between colonized people and white exploiters, and the literary representations of that opposition in the form of black/white, static/progressive time, are seen to be crucially dependent on the repression of women.
Third world feminism draws on a wide spread of discipline and techniques (psychoanalysis, deconstruction, semiotics, cultural history) and start from the assumption that the sign ‘woman’ is a key feature of colonial writing. It is noticed that the unequal relations between the European colonialists and the non-European colonized are represented discursively in gendered terms. Employing deconstruction, third world feminists reveal how a Eurocentric perspective narrates women as ‘others’ through (breaks and absences) gender representations, exposing racist and misogynist constructions. A study of this process of signification reveals the construction of ‘race’ as an oppressing system.

Another specific, major focus of third world feminists is to analyze how ‘vocabulary’ is employed to further ‘textual repression’ and construct ‘colonized (third world) women’ in terms of monolithic images. Imperialism imposes homogeneity through means of ‘repetition, gender stereotyping and constructing myths’. Native women are shown to be ‘outside’ the progressive time and history of the colonizers, and therefore ‘primitive’. Moreover, native women encapsulate all that is ‘exotic as against a natural order’, which the white colonizers contain in their values.

This ‘fetishism of the other’ argues Chandra Talpade Mohanty in Under Western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourse, is transparent when the imperialist substitutes natural or generic categories (of emotion or primitivism) for those that are socially constructed. The colonized Asians and Africans are seen to be ‘emotional’ while the white European colonizers are shown as ‘rational’ showing an extreme imperial/colonial gender stereotypification. In the colonial male psyche a colonized/colonizer female opposition is expressed in terms of black/coloured or she devil versus white goddess. Everything non-white is ‘mysterious’.

By showing how patriarchy, gender stereotyping, and imperialism
are instrumental in what third world feminists affirm as ‘imperial patriarchy’, a major task of third world feminists is to create a discourse which exposes this valorization of patriarchal and imperial values of the west. They show how this imperial patriarchy is established in the world of literature through its literary conventions. They try to replace these with unbiased constructions of gender, ethnicity and writings.

This overview of the ‘second phase of the women’s movement’ is instructive as well as indicative of the Herculean task feminism has undertaken. From exorcising humanity of the maleficent patriarchal machinations to constructing a gender-neutral discourse and literary convention, the ‘second generation feminists’ have had their hands occupied with the ideal of intellectual reformation. Their academic sophistication while deriving nourishment and strength from various eclectic discourses has got divided into two schools of complimentary but often competing feminist scholarship — Anglo-American and French.

The American and English critics have for the most part been engaged in empirical and thematic studies of writings by and about women. Maintaining interests in traditional concepts like theme, motif and characterization, they seem to accept the conventions of ‘literary realism’ and consequently see in literature representations of women, their lives and experiences, which must be evaluated against reality. The English feminists are slightly different from their American counterparts, for they tend to be ‘socialistic’ in orientation, aligning with Marxism.

However, Anglo-American feminist scholars are engaged in the development of a political position because they feel that political power is needed to challenge the forms of male domination in the institutions of literature and literary study: particularly the ‘literary canon’. Myth feminist criticism and Marxist/socialist feminist criticism are the major approaches of the Anglo-American tradition.
The French feminists, in contrast, deal with concerns other than literature ‘per se’. They are occupied with the machinations of language, gender representation and psychology, and their philosophical predications, before analyzing literary texts themselves. When the French stress on the ‘text’, their emphasis is very much on ‘writing’, the pleasures of reading and writing, and using the two notions they subvert the patriarchal discourse through ‘play rather than by confrontation or exclusion’ (Webster 80). Psychoanalysis, deconstruction and postmodernism are major philosophical approaches of interest to the French feminist scholars.

French feminists focus on re-inscribing the ‘maternal moment’ in literature. Their return to, or revision of, the mother and maternal tones, and of the semiotic element in language could be a mechanism for feminists to subvert the traditional literary representations.

French feminists see language as determining our perception of gender and ourselves as gendered beings. They probe the ways in which society perceive gender and creates gendered subjects. The ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ are constructed binaries, and in order to change society we need to change representations and deconstruct the established formulations.

In recent years a number of French feminists have used poststructuralist positions and techniques to question the founding concepts of ‘feminism’ itself. These feminists have identified differences in race, class, sexual preference, nationality and historical situation. They attack the largely white, Eurocentric, heterosexual feminist approaches of the Anglo-American and French schools of literary criticism. Black feminism, Lesbian feminism and third world feminism provide insights into the understanding of the international ramifications of patriarchal capitalism and women’s oppression.
Thus feminism is composed of many ‘feminisms’, which abound with cultural differences between nationalities, minority (black, lesbian, third world) and majority (white, Eurocentric, heterosexual) feminist criticisms and between languages. However, it has been noted that ‘second wave feminism’, with its academic eclecticism, finds ‘strength in diversity’. Literary feminism provides a penetrating examination of the cultural and economic conditions of women’s oppression. The one denominator common to all the ‘feminisms’ is the dismantling of patriarchal assumptions and enlarging or replacing of the ‘canon’.

Another common concern is to offer new reading practices based on new assumptions and thereby equal status for women vis-à-vis men. Feminism believes that only a non-patriarchal, non-racist, gender-neutral feminine construction and representations of ‘women’ in literature can bring about a positive cultural, and political reformation and reconciliation between the sexes.

Literature and popular culture are viewed by feminists ‘to be discursive instruments of future power’. A literary work for them is a powerful tool of change (and of perpetuation), and so we see feminist literary criticism incorporating several areas: from reclamation to resisting, from widening traditional literary history to creating an ecriture feminine and a female aesthetic.

Since literature is a political act, literary feminism has to politically engage in subverting and appropriating all available forms of expression, whether these are everyday or institutional like ‘the canon’. Feminism’s engagement with subversive and destabilizing movements is not degenerative to the cultural ethos but rather regenerative, for it yearns to include women as ‘equals’. Significantly feminists, whether of the ‘first or second generation’, have been occupied with presenting ‘an alternate reality’ against the all-pervasive and oppressive patriarchal ideology.