Chapter III

Feminist critique of patriarchy with special reference to Marxist feminist perspective

The main thrust of feminist literary criticism of the second wave women’s movement is its critique of patriarchy or androcentricism. For feminists the modes of representations in literature are ‘androcentric’ because they are centered around men and partly ‘phallocentric’, because in most systems of sexual differentiation ‘the phallus’ is taken to be the principle signifier (Ruthven).

Since possession of a phallus entails power in a phallocentric society, feminists describe ‘this symbolic order of representation’ with its androcentric bias and phallocentric signification as patriarchy. Feminists have been tirelessly battling against the oppressive effects of a patriarchal domination in all spheres of our society, polity and culture.

Judith Fetterley writing in the preface of her seminal work The Resisting Reader, quotes two stanzas from Emily Dickinson’s poem and so very consummately describes the angst and suffering of women under patriarchy:

“A loss of something ever felt I –
The first that I could recollect
Bereft I was – of what I knew not
Too young that any should suspect

A mourner walked among the children
I notwithstanding went about
As one bemoaning a Dominion
Itself the only prince cast out –
In the first two stanzas of this poem Dickinson has defined the condition of woman in a patriarchal culture. Her primal act of consciousness is the sense of loss, a phenomenon that Freud in his massive phallocentrism arrogantly analyzed as a lament for a specific bit of flesh rather than for the possibilities of personhood, which it represents. Bereft, disinherited, cast out, woman is the Other, the Outsider, a mourner among children; never really child because never allowed to be fully self-indulgent; never really adult because never permitted to be fully responsible; forever a ‘young mourner,’ a ‘little woman’; super human, subhuman but never simply human. ...Her condition is isolation; conviction of being ‘itself the only Prince cast out’; and her self-image is monstrous because that is the consequence of isolation. And because that is the consequence of the patriarchal predication that to be human is to be male. The condition of woman under patriarchy is precisely that of a prince cast out. Forced in every way to identify with men, yet incessantly reminded of being woman, she undergoes a transformation into an ‘it’, the dominion of personhood lost indeed (Fetterley ix [preface]).

For feminists civilization is pervasively patriarchal (male centered and controlled), organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all domains: social, economic, political and cultural. All knowledge systems, they allege, perpetuate a patriarchal superiority in society. Because of her lack of the identifying male organ and hence male powers, woman is defined in negative reference to the male, against the human norm, as an ‘Other’. Feminists feel that the prevailing concepts of gender are ‘cultural constructs’ of an omnipresent patriarchal civilization.

Further, this patriarchal ideology permeated works of literature and writings with its androcentric prejudice and a ‘phallocentric signification’ (Ruthven). A patriarchal culture to a considerable extent is predicated, on the argument that men and women are made for each other
and on the conviction that ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ are natural reflections of that ‘divinely ordained complement’.

Feminists believe that women in the process of their being ‘socialized’, are taught to internalize the reigning patriarchal ideology, and so are conditioned to look down upon their own sex and thereby cooperate in their own subordination. Another feature of how this patriarchal bureaucracy perpetuates itself is through construction and propagation of ‘images of women’, which are complicit in patriarchy’s primary predication of value. In this way ‘the masculine’ in our culture has come to be identified as active, dominating, adventurous, rational, creative: the primary value. The ‘feminine’ on the other hand is equated with the very opposites of the primary value and is thus understood as passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional, conventional: the secondary.

This hierarchy is clearly indicative of man’s privileged position at woman’s expense. Jeniffer Hansen in her introduction to Luce Irigaray’s essay There Are Two Sexes, Not One, writes that ‘the opposites man and woman are not symmetrical, but clearly hierarchal. For example, woman is not the opposite of man, but the negation of man. Man ‘alone’ is the paradigmatic metaphysical concept of human beings, and women are merely inferior instances of this concept. The operation of binary oppositions in culture works insidiously to shape our psyches so that we learn that ‘man’ is the Universal, while ‘woman’ is contingent, particular and deficient’ (Oliver ed. 202).

This patriarchal ideology pervades those writings, which have been considered great literature (Oedipus, Ulysses, Hamlet, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, For Whom The Bell Tolls). It is observed that while the male characters pursue masculine interests in a masculine field of action, the female characters when they play any role, are marginal and
subordinate. Their ‘functional value’ is either complimentary to or in opposition to the heroes’ desire and enterprises.

Lacking autonomous female role models and implicitly addressed to male readers, feminist literary critics have unearthed how these literary works alienate the woman by either leaving her out or soliciting her to identify against her self by taking up the position of male subject and thus assuming male values and perception, feeling and acting.

All this implies that literature is a political construction and the women’s movement, political as it is, concerned itself from its very beginning, as noted elsewhere in this study, with literature. Power is the issue in the politics of literature as it is in the politics of anything else. This manifestation of power is often disguised and presented as objective reality through aesthetic and literary works and is, according to Judith Fetterley, ‘all the more potent in its effect because they (patriarchal designs) are impalpable’ (xi). The one way women are unconscious of this patriarchal design, is through the posture of the apolitical, through the specious argument that literature speaks objective truths through forms and images thereby reflecting reality.

The feminists realized the significance of the ‘images of women’, promulgated and perpetuated by literature, and saw it as vital to identify them, combat them and question their authority and coherence. Thus, Lee Edwards has identified three major stereotypical images of women in literature as ‘insipid heroines, sexy survivors or demonic destroyers’ in her article ‘Women, Energy and Middlemarch’.

Literary feminists observe that the representation of women in literature is one of the most important forms of ‘socialization’, since it provides the role models, which indicated to women and men, what
constitutes acceptable versions of the ‘feminine’ and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations. For feminists a major objective became the unmasking of what is termed by many as ‘the mechanisms of patriarchy, i.e., the cultural mindset in men and women which perpetuate sexual inequality’ (Barry 122). Cultural reality is not the emasculation of men by women, but the emasculation of women by men. Women are ‘socialized’ and ‘conditioned’ to identify with the male point of view and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values and mechanisms perpetuated through religious and mythical significations one of whose central principles is misogyny.

Since language is widely regarded as the primary signifying practice, which aids in the socialization and conditioning of society, feminists see an unequivocal case for supposing that language encodes androcentric attitudes in a patriarchal society. The ‘materiality of language’ as complicit in the oppression of women has been sought to be ascertained by empirical investigations into how language through its usage discriminates against women and imprisons them. In so doing the duplicity of language has been exposed.

Feminists found that language, far from reflecting reality, actually constituted it by structuring it according to its arbitrary signification. Thus, women were doubly jeopardized: prisoners in a patriarchy and prisoners in the prison house of language. They were the subjects of this arbitrariness as well as students trying to master its skill and thereby willfully subjecting themselves to the arbitrariness of its semantics. Asserting that androcentrism is inscribed in language, feminists began employing socio-linguistic knowledge into deciphering how masculine and feminine subject-positions are produced and reinforced in literature. For feminists, there was no pre-linguistic and ‘essential’ masculinity that got ‘reflected’ in language to the detriment of women. They saw language used as a medium to mediate gender distinctions in
society thereby revealing its corporeality or social utility and thus making sense of language as a cultural phenomenon with obvious polemical advantages to patriarchy (Ruthven).

Adrienne Rich was the first amongst the many feminists who saw language as oppressive to women. Many agreed with Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar when they claimed that ‘language itself was almost literally alien to the female tongue.’ It was argued that the ‘female self’s alienation from language is in the pronoun system, and specifically in conventions governing first-person and third-person usage, the pronominal forms most immediately affected by the problematization of speaking and of being spoken about’ (Ruthven 62).

Many Anglophone feminists turned to Jacques Lacan’s interpretation of Freud’s theories of psychosexual development, infancy and early childhood. Feminists saw a resolution of the pronominal enigma in Lacan’s account of what he calls ‘an Imaginary order’ which is the unconscious, and a ‘Symbolic order’ which is the conscious, with a child perceiving ‘the illusion of integral identity between the self and (m)other’ (Ruthven 63).

However, when the father intervenes through his presence between the self and mother, the child registers this act of perception and becomes aware of the Symbolic system through language. The price asked for acquiring skills in the Symbolic according to feminists, is mastery of the pronominal system that multiplies distinctions between self and (m)other. According to Ruthven this loss and separation for Lacan is symbolized by the phallus (not to be identified with the penis), which privileges the psychosexual development of boys at the expense of girls. If the phallus is taken to be the prime signifier of the ‘Symbolic’ and all it contains including language, then domiciling themselves in the Symbolic
is much more problematic for girls than for boys, who possess the organ which symbolically rules the Symbolic, and under whose sceptre a phallocentric world is organized. Hence, many feminists like Julia Kristeva and Helene Cixous have attempted to re-theorize feminine sexuality in such a manner that the phallus does not control the entry in the Symbolic order of language and girls/women are not subject to the law of the father (patriarchy).

As noticed above, feminists are especially critical of the third person pronouns. The use of the word ‘man’ to denote not only members of the male sex but also human beings of both sexes, encourages men to see themselves as representative of the species. This ‘generic masculine’ makes its presence felt pronominally in instances where women are effaced altogether. We see that all universal, divine and scientific phenomena with positive attributes are addressed as ‘he’ or with masculine pronoun. All negative or enigmatic connotations are addressed in the feminine pronominal system: the sun because it gives warmth and light is ‘he’ while the moon and stars are referred to with the ‘she/her’ pronoun.

Feminists see this pronominal system of language as instrumental in the preservation of male supremacy and reiteration of that supremacy in the Symbolic order of language. Men, therefore, see their own subjectivity in terms of being non-gendered because the masculine is identified with the universal. Further, uncovering of androcentric bias in linguistic usage shows that many things pertaining to women have been named in terms of their relation to men, like poet-poetess, author-authororess, implying that women at best are a special case and at worst a substitute of the real thing. Many feminists detect in this the working of ‘sexual politics’ (Millett), a system through which men gain power over women, the power to create and kill, to ‘mar’, ‘mend’ and ‘make’, but always retaining their superior normative value.
Anglo-American feminists realized that language is not inherently sexist, but can be put to sexist use. Words are merely signs for things and their relationship to reality is arbitrary. It was felt that women's oppression lies outside language, in the social stereotypes embedded in language and disseminated through stereotypical representations of women in literature and the ideology of patriarchal capitalism.

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Marxism/socialism's interaction with women's movements and issues is as old as the movements themselves. During the 1960s, the women's movement of the second generation reacquainted itself with Marxism/socialism's emancipatory insights into understanding their predicament and thereby finding a solution to their unfortunate wanton subjugation by patriarchal capitalism, (Friedrich Engels: The Origin of The Family [1884]).

For Marxists literature is not something separate from the world or to put it in other words it simply does not reflect the world in a passive and mirror-like way. Marxists have devoted themselves to exposing the hidden historical and socio-cultural assumptions in written works. Employing the concepts of class, ideology and hegemony, they have unveiled the politics and sub-humanism of so called emancipatory intellectual narratives (novel). For Marxists, the literary institutions (texts/criticism) by appearing to be oblivious to questions of class, presuppose a literary work as transcending social and historical formation.

Further, they view that literary works of classic realism (novels), by neglecting or subordinating the question of 'class' while propounding values as universal truth only perpetuate a 'status quo' and reinforce social prejudices, which are inimical or demeaning to women. Theories of 'class' originate with Karl Marx and 'culture and class', for him are very closely linked. Culture, far from being divine, is seen as a product of social and
economic forces prevailing at the moment. It is a ‘materially’ influenced construction.

Hence, new class formations bring forth new cultural forms to establish their sense of realism. Drawing on Louis Althusser’s view that texts reveal imaginary reproductions of the relations of unequal sexual power and social relationships (1971). Marxist/socialist feminists focus on the representations of ideology in literature believing that texts reveal these imaginary reproductions of unequal sexual power. The British Marxist/socialist feminist Juliet Mitchell in her key essay ‘Women: the longest revolution’ (1966) uses Althusser’s thesis to describe how literature and culture are material forces in a patriarchal tyranny. The four structures of capitalist patriarchy identified by Marxists/socialist feminists are – reproduction, production, the socialization of children and, sexuality as being interdependent. The Marxist/socialist feminists believe that women’s liberation can only be achieved by challenging this capitalist patriarchal ideology and thus, a cultural and social revolution is needed.

AntonioGramsci argued that historically the ruling classes have been able to exercise leadership not through direct coercion but by indirect means, through what he described as the concept of ‘hegemony’. Under hegemonic control, people actively work towards their own subordination. Gramsci stressed in particular the role of culture as central to hegemony so that a whole range of communications from literature to the mass media, together with activities such as leisure, contribute to this effect of allowing people to ‘make sense’ of themselves and the world in ways which reinforce and perpetuate the dominant power relations of society.

Marxism’s appeal for feminists is that it shows them how to analyze a social system with a view to getting it changed. Marxism identifies ‘capitalism’ and the modes of production, which support it
(patriarchy), as the material base of the class system, which is the source of all oppression. Friedrich Engels writing in *The Origin of The Family* argues that ‘the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male’ (69), thus equating husbands with the bourgeoisie and wives with the proletariat. Marxist feminists see the oppression of women as ‘class oppression’ for women are a class oppressed by men—the ruling class. According to them this oppression takes place through the ‘patriarchal capitalist ideology’, which men employ as the normative. It is experienced through the ‘cultural hegemony’ of literary institutions amongst the many other ‘lived systems of meanings and values’ (Raymond Williams).

For Marxist/socialist feminists the subjection of women under a patriarchal capitalist ideology can end only when capitalism collapses. They view the oppression of women as the material base of a patriarchal class system on which the sexist super structure (culture and all its hegemonic manifestations) of society stands. A change in the woman’s condition can only be brought about ‘at the price of a revolution in production’ (192), as Simone de Beauvoir has stated in *Force of Circumstance*.

The works of Luce Irigaray is of seminal importance in giving shape to Marxist feminist perspective in literature. She argues how women and nature are turned into the raw materials that fuel men’s projects. Further, women and nature contribute greatly to satiate man’s desires and sexual needs. The society as we know it and the prevailing culture is based upon the exchange of women. The entry into the ‘social order’ or the ‘Symbolic order’, is only possible by the fact that men or groups of men circulate women among themselves as in matrimony, and thus make women’s bodies—through ‘their use, consumption and circulation into an unknown infrastructure’ (Irigaray) which makes social life and culture possible. A woman is reduced to ‘sexualized female’, which is an
exploitable matter.

It is further noted that in patriarchal societies all systems of exchange as well as all modes of productive work that are cognizable, valuable and rewardable are identified with men. Conversely all objects of production namely ‘women’, ‘signs’ and ‘commodities’ are ‘products’ and thus objects to be used, to be transacted amongst men, their exchange as goods stimulating ‘wealth’. The use and ‘traffic’ of women is seen to subtend and uphold the reign of patriarchy and the ‘economy’. In fact economy becomes a patriarchal socio-political construction, where this trade takes place and it requires that women make themselves available for consumption, exchange and circulation like ‘commodities’ for the smooth functioning of the patriarchal socio-cultural life.

Karl Marx’s analysis of ‘commodities’ as the elementary form of capitalist wealth can best be understood as an interpretation of the status of women in patriarchal societies. Marxist feminists have identified the organization of such societies and their symbolic systems as based on the ideology of ‘patriarchal capitalism’. The development of such an ideology is characterized by the basics of a capitalist regime: the submission of ‘nature’ to ‘labor’ (Marx) on the part of men who constitute ‘nature’ and women who constitute ‘labor’. What Marxist feminists have analyzed is how men have signified themselves with ‘nature’ and value while ‘labor’ is women, a commodity to be possessed, exploited and exchanged amongst them to generate wealth. The genesis of social exploitation of women as a ‘labor class’ and the origin of private property is attributed by them to the father-man, who assured of his reproductive-products marks them with his name. Thus, we observe the origination of the patriarchal and also what Marxists see as the producer-nature, product-labor signification.

In other words, Marxist feminists see all social regimes as based
upon the exploitation of one ‘class’ of producers, namely women by another ‘class’, namely men. Women are seen in terms of a double system of exchange and value, firstly as ‘reproductive’ value (reproduction of children resulting in the augmentation of the labor force), and secondly as commodities or products in themselves whose constitution as ‘exchange value’ underwrites the Symbolic order as such.

‘As commodities, women are thus two things at once: utilitarian objects and bearers of value’ (Irigaray 214). They are commodities because they have a reproductive value form and their ‘bodies constitute a material value form’ for men through their possession or accumulation. Their value on the market is by virtue of their being a product of men’s ‘labor’, exchanged not as women but as ‘material objects’ (producers of human labor force, exchange value). It is felt that the only value a woman has is her exchangibility.

Since commodities and their relative value cannot be measured in terms of its own kind, we notice a fabricated measure for the character of the commodity-woman through its transformation by man’s social/symbolic signification of ‘labor’. Since women-commodities cannot mirror one another because of their relative value, their natural and social value can only be approximated ‘when they are compared by and for man’ (Irigaray 215). Their purpose is to serve and yield, give up their bodies to men.

Another Marxist feminist observation is how women as commodities imitate the paternal authority and draw their value for men. As commodities they share in the cult of the father, always striving to copy, and imitate the one who is the representative of ‘nature’ and from this resemblance draw their value. Her body is divided into two: her ‘natural’ body and her socially valued, ‘exchangeable body’, which is tuned and toned with masculine values and assumptions. Marxist feminists have
exposed this metaphysical characterization of social operations by showing how ‘women’ through this dual entity possess a ‘phenomenal value form’ (Irigaray), which is distinct from its natural form.

They are of the view that there is no mysticism in their ‘use value’ per se, for however useful the varied kinds of labor may be, they are physiological facts, and as such the functions of the human organism. It is when women are enveloped in the form of a commodity, exchanged and bartered for the needs and desires of men among men and transformed into ‘value-invested objects’ and reduced to ‘products’ of man’s labor and desire that they become ‘fetish objects’ (Irigaray) in a patriarchy. With their value/worth doubled: as social exchange commodities and as signs of the manifestations and circulation of power of the phallus, women are thereby subjugated to the male hierarchy.

The Marxist feminists have observed that this operation of social exchanges has developed its own logic and theory where ‘man’ is the concept and ‘woman’ the product or object (which is visible and material correlative) of that concept. Man’s ‘sexual pleasure’ corresponds to such a social state where appropriation of nature, desire to (re)produce and exchange these products: ‘...the needs/desires of this masculine sexuality have presided over the evolution of a certain social order, from its primitive form – private property to its developed form – capitalism’ as observed by Luce Irigaray in Women on The Market.

The circulation of women among men is what establishes the operations of society in a patriarchal dispensation where men appropriate all levers of control and meaning to themselves. Women thus in such a social order represent a natural value and a social value. Their ‘development’ lies in the passage from one to the other.

‘Mother’, ‘virgin’ and ‘prostitute’ are the social roles imposed
on women in a patriarchal society according to the feminists. As mother, woman remains on the side of (reproductive) nature, her reproductive instruments marked with the name of the father and a subject of his house, his private property, and therefore excluded from exchange. As they are (re)productive of children and of the labor force, their responsibility is to maintain the social order.

The virginal woman, on the other hand is pure exchange value, full of possibilities and enterprise. Till she is married she has social exchange value. The prostitute, though explicitly condemned is implicitly tolerated, her ‘value’ more in physical terms than social. Thus, we see the characteristics of feminine sexuality from faithfulnes, modesty, to ignorance of and lack of interest in sexual pleasure, a mere object or tool for masculine sexuality in a patriarchal society. These normal, female sexual characteristics give an idea of the status of women as ‘commodities’.

This economy of desire and economy of exchange, subject women into two schisms’ that are necessary to the ‘symbolic’ operations: (re)productive nature and fabricated or gendered feminity. Women are not even conscious of it because ‘socially’ they are ‘objects’ of desire and exchange, mimicking a ‘language’ they have not produced and ‘naturally’ they are shapeless, without any representatives or representations.

The practical realization of this meta-physical is through the appropriation of woman’s body by the father as in a patriarchy. She must submit herself to his power because of his monopoly of power that he has constructed through patriarchal capitalism and its socio-economic significations. Her body, materially and physically with the social values and exchange values attached and ascribed to it, inaugurates the ‘Symbolic order’.

Marxist feminists focus on the woman as a ‘commodity’ or object
of transaction among men, exploited through sexual, economic, social and cultural exchange, which is made possible through the Symbolic order and social system, constructed through an ideology of political economy: patriarchal capitalism.

Without the exploitation of women, the social order will collapse. With women no longer as a commodity—produced, consumed, appreciated and circulated, and their refusing to identify themselves with ‘the cult of the father’ (Irigaray 216) and the economic and cultural ‘mechanisms of patriarchy’ (Barry). Marxist feminists see a chance to reinterpret the symbolic social order and system to improve women’s relations to this system of production. Thus a change in woman’s condition can only be achieved at ‘the price of a revolution in production’ (Beauvoir).

Another major project of empirical Marxist/socialist feminism and its critique of a patriarchal culture is to expose the stereotypical representations of women in literary works. It is observed that androcentric biases in a patriarchal culture are best seen in the representations of women in literary works and other institutions of communication like the visual arts and the media. Second wave feminism focused on the ‘images of women’ in literary texts. Mary Ellman writing in her seminal work *Thinking About Women* (1968) noted that while the opinions about women were numerous, it was ‘not the plausibility or implausibility that intrigued her but rather their reiteration’ (preface xii). What enthuses Marxist second wave feminists is their interest ‘in women as words’ (Ellman).

Feminists see in the construction of stereotypes a subliminal patriarchal machination to encage women in male defined roles and thus control them and their destinies. Another instance of ‘sexual politics’ is unearthed. Feminist research of the ‘images of women’ in literature and literary conventions reveals how these ‘stereotypes’ categorise women into
‘types’, manipulated by a patriarchal ideology for maintaining its own representative signification.

Thus, these man-made literary taxonomies use binary categories to classify women as ‘sensuous roses or virginal lilies, pedestalled goddesses or downtrodden slaves, Eves or Mary’s, Madonna’s or Magdalene’s, damned whores or God’s police’ as illustrated by K.K. Ruthven in his Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction, (p. 72). The basic function of these literary character stereotypes is to reinforce the notion of the patriarchal patronizing of women and of its perverse ‘sexual politics’ where men are happy to idealize women, provided they stay in their proper sphere and do not threaten the world of men at large. This classification with its angelic and demonic binaries is employed by patriarchy to save the women from their inherent dark constitution and present them with alternative benign paradigms.

While sociologists view White supremacist violence against Negroes and other dark skinned races as the sum and result of ‘cultural stereotypes’ produced during European colonization. Marxist feminists view ‘cultural stereotypes’ to be far more subversive to women. These ‘cultural stereotypes’ are in the main ‘sexual and gender stereotypes’ that attempt to encode transhistorical and immutable human experiences as only worth having. In Thinking About Women, Mary Ellman elucidates how women are repeatedly associated with the prosaic, the naïve, her value only in sexual gratification and reproduction. Even child-birth is seen as ‘the most natural and least self-conscious of human experiences’ (61-62) whereas ‘careful differences, instead of similarities, will be described between the production of the child and the production, say, of rhymed verse’ (62).

Further, women are seen to be what men are not, and hence we
observe their being stereotyped as passive, thoughtless, pacific, and if they speak their mind then as shrews, virago’s and harridan’s; all feminine traits. The resultant implication is that women can only achieve ‘their ideal condition’ by rising above themselves (Ellman).

In addition, Cultural images of women are thus sought to be realized only in terms of their relation to men and their reiteration in literature helps to valorize them as the ‘norm’. Mary Carruthers in her Imagining Women: notes towards a feminist poetic (1979) states that traditionally women’s lives have been imagined in relations to men’s lives, as daughters, mothers, mistresses and wives of men. They have in consequence been imagined either in terms of a single role psychologically relevant to men (virgin, temptress, bitch, goddess,) or in terms of their single social and biological function in male society (preparing for marriage, or married)...’ (20). Either way the main function is to reinforce the sexist view. According to D. B. Schmidt, the only way true happiness is possible for women is by finding the essence of true womanhood, wherein feminine subordination supports a male domination (Ruthven).

Feminist critics of patriarchy find a lot of stereotypical conceptions of women, particularly about the topic of feminity. Ordinarily, not only sexual terms but also sexual opinions are imposed upon the external world. It is observed that all forms are subsumed by our concepts of male and female temperaments. In fact, the association of women with nature and of men with art is repeatedly stressed. It is generally suspected that women infect their nature not with art but with artifice.

Mary Ellman notes that every feminine virtue implies a feminine vice: chaste or frigid; intuition or irrationality; motherhood or domination (65). This duality in women is sought to be ascribed to their physical bodies, in which light and dark spirits co-exist. Women are sought to be
Presently feminists are more interested in a semiotic approach to the ‘images of women’. They view the ‘eternal feminine’ (Ruthven 74) entity, with an unchanging and transhistorical essence to be an ideological construction. They concentrate on the ‘stereotypical representations’ of women rather than ‘images of women’. Since feminism is premised on the notion that ‘everything is politics’, women’s representations in literary works are a good case to unearth sexual politics.

These representations are invested with social and cultural currency through literary conventions. Ernst Robert Curtins in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, traces the convention of ‘topoi’ or commonplaces which get transmitted from generation to generation under the influence of ‘rhetorical tradition’. According to K.K. Ruthven, these ‘topoi’ enter literature as conventional images and he takes Shakespeare’s comedy *As You Like It* as an example, quoting, ‘All the world’s a stage’ (scene II, line vii) to stress his point. Feminists have discovered how these conventional topois very subtly metamorphose themselves into sexism. E.R. Curtis has investigated and evidenced the sexual politics of topoi ‘in the imagery of marriage poems, known as epithalamy’. Curtis explains how the ‘elm and vine’ topois, represent the two sexes as complementary, with the ‘elm’ representing the stronger husband supporting the weaker ‘vine’, while she produces the fruits of her womb. It is also noticed that these conventions serve social and political purpose like when in plays, comedies end with a marriage and tragedies with a victory for the king. ‘The device of ending stage comedies with a marriage is an economical way of tying up loose narrative ends; ...a device for bringing women legally under the control of men...’ (Ruthven 76), furthering patriarchal phallocracy.
Similarly does Jean E. Kennard describe the convention of ‘two suitors’ where the heroine is obliged to choose between two male suitors, both opposites of each other in every way. A good instance of this convention may be observed in the novels of such eminent novelists as Jane Austen, Bronte sisters, Margaret Mitchell and Dame Barbara Cartland to name a few. The pulp Mills and Boon series of novelettes written exclusively for the reading enjoyment of adolescent and young women is dedicated it seems to perpetuating this convention under the innocuous title of ‘romances’. The ideology at function here is that women need husbands to sustain their lives. As our social and political lives are culturally coded, our cultural practices are reaffirmed as literary conventions, and give the illusion of justifying their existence by imitating life, observes Ruthven in Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction.

A feminist critique of women’s status, images and representations in a patriarchal society is to unmask the oppressive nature of ‘patriarchy’. It helps them in understanding about themselves and resist this oppression. One of the aims of feminism is to break this patriarchal ideology and hegemony, expose all channels of its perpetuation and manifestation that makes women feel inferior to men, and at odds with ‘reality’ to which they are forced to conform.

According to Judith Fetterey in The Resisting Reader, Feminist literary criticism aims to give ‘a voice to a different reality and different vision’, and thus ‘bring a different subjectivity to bear on the old universality’ (xi). Further she states how ‘when only one reality is encouraged, legitimized, and transmitted... then we have the conditions necessary for that confusion of consciousness in which impalpability flourishes’ (xi). Hence, bringing forth attitudes towards women involves ‘to make available consciousness that has been largely left unconscious and thus to change our understanding of these fictions, our relation to
them, and their effect on us (xi). To conclude we may say that ‘Consciousness-raising’ through evaluation of literary texts and inaugurating oppositional practices of reading, writing and criticism is one of the practices and objectives of feminist literary criticism.