INTRODUCTION: THE AGE OF EXTREME CAPITALISM

No well-being of one place is innocent of the misery of another.

-Zygmunt Bauman

In a world of free trade and unfettered circulation of capital and commodities, nobody and nothing remains unaffected. Events in one part of the globe have a bearing on all other places elsewhere. Lives are redeemed and destroyed at the same time and due to the same reason. Many would argue that this has happened all along in the history of mankind. Assuredly, this has happened, but never at any moment were the repercussions of certain actions/policies of certain groups of people/organizations operating from certain centres of power felt so far and wide and with such contradictory consequences. In other words, the ripple effect of extreme capitalism has ushered in an altogether new era, popularly called ‘the global age’. This contemporary phase of capitalism that is characterized by global free trade, made possible by extreme advances in science and technology along with highly developed communication systems and information highways that have contracted space and time enormously, is a watershed in the evolutionary history of humankind. Decisions taken in one part of the globe now affect those living hundreds and thousands of miles away in other corners of the sphere. Capital and its manifestation — ‘the commodity’ — are the reigning metaphors of this age. A society of producers becomes a society of consumers and capital and labour undergo commoditization and recommoditization. Social mobility and social marginalization occur at the same time across distances.

Globalization has not only “conjure[d] up new possibilities but also new vulnerabilities” (Western Civilizations 1045). As defined by Coffin and Stacey in their book, “Globalization means integration. . . .It is the process of creating a rising number of networks — political, social, economic, and cultural — that span the globe. New technologies, new economic imperatives, and changing laws have combined to make global exchange faster . . . to ‘intensify economic, social and cultural relationships. Information, ideas, goods, and people now move rapidly and easily across national boundaries’” (1045). This definition explains the phenomenon of globalization well. Yet like most simplistic explanations of the latter, it hides the insidiousness and violence of the process. Rather, it ignores the ground reality and exists in a vacuum. If things were as happy as they look through such elucidations,
there would be no misery in this world. The latter, unfortunately does exist, thus coercing us to look beyond and beneath the illusions. Arguably, globalization is a centuries-old, cumulative process of exchange of goods and commodities between different countries whose maximum acceleration has been witnessed only in the latter half of the twentieth century with the tremendous increase in communication and information technology along with increased mobility of capital and labour. Yet unbridled globalization has led to deprivation of indigenous peoples of their ancestral lands, wanton human rights violations and political repression, degradation of environment, mindless consumerism and commodity fetishism, and imposition of Western culture that warps, marginalizes and effaces the cultures of third world peoples. For women, globalization has been particularly devastating — displacement, commodification and modern-day slavery, ‘feminization of poverty’ and worsening forms of capitalist exploitation are only some of the consequences.

Tony Judt describes the phenomenon of globalization as “an updating of the high modernist faith in technology and rational management which marked the enthusiasms of the postwar decades” (193). It sanctifies economic relationships, proclaiming them to be “laid down by nature” (193). At the same time it works to exclude politics as any substantial alternative. Emphasizing the increasing inequalities that have “become less marked between countries . . . than within countries”, he argues that sustained economic expansion does not guarantee equality or prosperity or even a reliable source of economic development (194). Explaining the rapid series of events and changes taking place globally, he asserts:

Today, it is as though the 20th century never happened. We have been swept up into a new master narrative of “integrated global capitalism”, economic growth and indefinite productivity gains. Like earlier narratives of endless improvement, the story of globalization combines an evaluative mantra (“growth is good”) with the presumption of inevitability: globalization is with us to stay, a natural process rather than a human choice. The ineluctable dynamic of global economic competition and integration has become the illusion of the age. (193)

This illusion is determining the present and the future of millions of people around the world. The supporters of liberal reform have successfully managed to make a
majority believe that there is no alternative to global capitalism and that the latter (for better or for worse) is the best available economic system that will lift hundreds of thousands of people out of poverty and consequently make the world a more equal place. The paradigms of ‘free trade’, ‘growth’ and ‘development’ in the current global economy have been eulogized by the former whereas the complex social, political, cultural and environmental repercussions of such a system on the lives of many in the developing third world have been either ignored or deliberately overlooked. The globalized world run by transnational corporations overseen by the big three — the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization, has paradoxically resulted in a situation where most nation-states are now ‘borderless’ for capital and goods but not so for people, with the developed West having devised even more stringent rules to restrict the entry of people from less developed countries. The erasing of the national character of the nation-states has led to an ideological disconnect with the concept of the “homeland” or “motherland” (Sethi 2011: 38). Curiously, this has not led to any lessening of the importance of ‘land’. Rather the opposite has occurred. Under the global political economy, ‘land’ is now one of the most important, economically-profitable resources at the disposal of man. The “ideological dematerialization of land” (Sethi 2011: 38) that occurs when nation-states zealously protect their individual territories while facilitating the free flow of capital across boundaries at the same time, has only accentuated the ever-increasing importance of ‘private ownership of land’. The latter is a recurring concept in the globalization discourse and warrants a careful analysis.

This study seeks to analyze the autobiographical narratives of Rigoberta Menchu (an indigenous Mayan Indian from Guatemala), C.K. Janu (a tribal leader of the Adiyar community in Kerala), Shirin Ebadi (currently a lawyer in Iran) and Riverbend (an ordinary girl blogger from Iraq) by focusing on their narratives of resistance against the forces unleashed by globalization — a complex phenomenon with far-reaching consequences. The various manifestations of globalization in the religious, political, socio-economic and cultural spheres in third world countries that have impacted the lives of these intrepid women would be a key area of interest. Rigoberta Menchu, C.K. Janu, Riverbend and Shirin Ebadi voice resistance against the injustices meted out to them by oppressive ruling elites through their autobiographical narratives. Indirectly, they resist the insidious workings of global capitalism in their specific local contexts. These narratives are their real-life stories
written by the women-protagonists themselves or narrated by them to sympathetic listeners. These have been further translated after being transcribed. These narratives provide compelling case studies to analyze the impact of globalization on the individual lives of these women as also the communities that they belong to and suitably represent to a large extent. Their narratives of resistance against the forces unleashed by globalization throw up to scrutiny the various manifestations of this phenomenon in the social, political, cultural and ecological spheres in third world countries that particularly affect poor, rural, tribal and indigenous women. Yet the significant aspect of globalization is that of providing the very opportunities and tools (such as the internet which I will elaborate upon later) with which the marginalized can resist its negative impact.

The complex ramifications of globalization — the hegemonic actions of America, the ecological imbalances, the tensions and contradictions in traditional societies as they clash with Western cultural notions and ways of thought form the subject of my analysis. It is a study of narratives where the personal becomes the political and both are inextricably linked in subtle or violent ways. This aspect is significant as it helps in bridging the wide gap between theory and praxis. Theory in its contemporary form has forked further and further away from any kind of engagement with the social text. Currently, it is caught in a scholarly rut of endless debates that hold little value for those suffering from the repercussions of a rapidly changing global order. Any sense of dialogue and deliberation with the real world of increasing turmoil and unending violence is missing from the purview of existing theory. Therefore, it becomes pertinent that now, more than at any other point in time, theory is made compatible with activism. In this direction, my study is a reworking of the Marxist theoretical paradigm to bring back the radicalism that once formed a key aspect of the Marxist approach. The intention is to re-introduce the crucial element of ‘change’ that is amiss in most current theoretical pedagogies. I broadly use Marxism insofar as it helps women to achieve their ‘revolutions’. I define ‘revolution’ not as a very enormous, earth-shaking movement of society but one in which the personal is politicized. The women whose works I analyze negotiate with the limited space that is allowed to them by patriarchal structures. The latter can be identified as US capitalism in case of Menchu, the forcible acquisition of forest land by the State to be allotted to multinational corporations in case of Janu, the
invasion of Iraq by the US as highlighted in Riverbend’s blog and the religious patriarchy of the clerics denounced by Ebadi in her memoirs.

The localized, embedded existence of the afore-mentioned women conforms to a context-specific analytic. The universalist assumptions of Western feminist discourse are replaced by a third world feminism that takes into account difference, plurality and cultural sovereignty. These women represent their communities to a great extent and are fitting prototypes of their cultures. Therefore, a third world feminist approach to the current situation of women in the developing third world forms the supplementary methodology to the predominant Marxist theoretical framework in my project.

I

Karl Marx predicted the rise of a predatory capitalism in the near future wherein a global market economy would rule over most parts of the world. “A world after its own image” is the phrase he used to describe this emerging capitalist civilization in his *Communist Manifesto* some 150 years ago. This prediction of a world where ‘all that is solid melts into air’ perhaps meant the rise of a “turbo-capitalism”, “market fundamentalism”, “casino-capitalism”, “the cancer stage of capitalism” or the “McWorld” where all national boundaries would dissolve in the face of a global free-trade economic whirlwind (Bennet 145). He also envisaged a future where there would be inter-dependence of nations facilitated by advanced means of communication and technology and intellectual production that would be the common property of all nations. He even prophesied that “the cheap prices of its [the bourgeoisie’s] commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians’ intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate” (Marx 84). In fact, he sums up his vision of a cataclysmic capitalist world in these words:

Modern bourgeois society with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells. (85-6)
This vision, though, was not an apocalyptic one as Marx did not believe that capitalism would be the last stage in the evolution of human society. In his view, the greed and gluttony of the capitalist society would give way to a “socialist Utopia” wherein a classless society would come into being, ending all inequality and oppression, thus culminating human society’s evolutionary journey. It is here, in this prophecy that Marx has proved to be fallible. Instead of this utopian world consisting of an equal and classless society, the present globalized world is characterized by an ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor. This gap has widened not only among the developed first world and developing third world countries but is seen to be increasing even within the rich nations themselves. “Economic inequality is growing in the world’s richest countries, particularly in the United States, jeopardizing the American Dream of social mobility just as the world tilts toward recession,” says a 2008 report produced by the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (“Economic”). This report reiterates the fact that the economic growth of the last twenty years has benefitted the rich more than the poor, with the income gap widening in most OECD countries. This has happened despite significant steps taken by these countries to reduce inequality.

Marx in his *Communist Manifesto* begins by proclaiming that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (79). He writes about the impending revolution of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, resulting in the proletariat becoming the ruling class and eventually leading to the formation of a classless society. The proletariat refers to the industrial working class or the wage-labourers whereas the bourgeoisie is the class of modern capitalists or the owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labour. Marx explains that the modern bourgeoisie has “sprouted from the ruins of feudal society” and has not “done away with class antagonisms” (80). Instead “it has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones” (80).

He writes that this epoch of the bourgeoisie has simplified the class antagonisms. Now there are only two major classes facing each other: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. He describes the bourgeoisie in great detail:
The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his ‘natural superiors’, and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous ‘cash payment’. . . . It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom — Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation. (82)

The bourgeoisie, thus, is accused by Marx of destroying all family relations and converting them into mere “money relation[s]” (82). In the second chapter of the Manifesto, he writes: “There are, besides, eternal truths such as Freedom, Justice, etc., that are common to all states of society. But Communism abolishes eternal truths, it abolishes all religion, and all morality, instead of constituting them on a new basis; it therefore acts in contradiction to all past historical experience” (103). While further discussing his communist ideology, he explains: “The distinguishing feature of Communism is not the abolition of property generally, but the abolition of bourgeois property. But modern bourgeois private property is the final and most complete expression of the system of producing and appropriating products, that is based on class antagonisms, on the exploitation of the many by the few. . . . In this sense, the theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property” (96). He goes on to say that the Communist revolution forms the most radical rupture with traditional property relations and that it is not surprising that its development involves the most radical rupture with traditional ideas. The first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class so as to win the battle of democracy (103-4).

Marx’s description of the evolution of the bourgeoisie as the ruling capitalist class is convincing enough but his exposition of the proletariat as constituting of only the industrial wage-labourers that would ultimately rise in a revolution against the bourgeoisie does not seem complete in itself. This is because it excludes the lowest strata of society whom he calls the “social scum” or the “lumpenproletariat” (“lumpen” means rags and tatters) from its fold. This class, he condescends, is the
“dangerous class”, “that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society” which may “here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution; its conditions of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue” (92). This, however, is in contrast to what is happening in the contemporary world. The lumpenproletariat is the hardest hit by global capitalism whereas the conventional proletariat has formed trade unions and labour organizations to guard its interests and has seldom risen in a complete revolution against the capitalist class. Rather, it has sought to maintain a certain level of living with a minor agitation here or there for increasing wages or for getting certain rights. On the other hand, it is the “social scum” or the most marginalized sections consisting of the tribals (for instance, Janu’s tribal Adiyar community) or the indigenous communities (such as Menchu’s Indian community) or other weak sections that have started resisting their capitalist oppressors. But Marx would differ:

Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeois today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class. The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of modern industry; the proletariat is its special and essential product. (91)

There is, then, this problem with his definition of the proletariat. He limits it only to the industrial working class. Marx also asserts that “the modern labourer . . . instead of rising with the progress of industry, sinks deeper and deeper below the conditions of existence of his own class. He becomes a pauper, and pauperism develops more rapidly than population and wealth” (93). This is again not completely true as there has been an enormous increase in levels of income and standards of living of the conventional proletariat over the years. In fact, the greatest example of it is the rise of the middle class that has led to the creation of an altogether new cultural force. A new step on the ladder of economics has been introduced with the emergence of the middle class. This has also led to the possibility of social mobility among the lower sections of society. It is no longer impossible to be able to rise above one’s ranks. This phenomenon (that is, the rise of the middle class all over the world) was not envisaged by Marx in his work. Fredric Jameson highlights this discrepancy by stressing that “in a henceforth worldwide class system the oppositions in question are evidently a good deal more complicated and difficult to reconstruct than they were
within the more representational, or figurable, framework of the older nation state” (Jameson Reader 299).

Marx explains his communist ideals in the second chapter of the *Manifesto*. Among these measures, he claims, there has to be an “abolition of property in land and application of all rents of land to public purpose”, imposition of “a heavy progressive or graduated income tax”, “abolition of all right of inheritance”, “confiscation of the property of all emigrants and rebels”, “centralization of credit in the hands of the State”, “centralization of the means of communication and transport in the hands of the State”, and “equal liability of all to labour. Establishment of industrial armies, especially for agriculture” (104-5). In the last part of this chapter, he states, “When in the course of development, class distinctions have disappeared, and all production has been concentrated in the whole nation, the public power will lose its political character” (105). This will lead to the construction of a classless society. This assertion is, again, problematic as when the proletariat emerges victorious (after defeating the bourgeoisie) and thus becomes the ruling class, where then is the guarantee that it will itself not become the new ruling class? In other words, who or what can ensure that this new ruling class will not become another dictatorship? Further, one cannot ignore the question of internal social differences among the proletariat itself.

One of the positive outcomes of Marxism has been the introduction of the concept of the ‘welfare state’ in western societies. It was the threat of Marxism that forced capitalism to reform. But the negative aspect of this was that due to stronger regulatory frameworks in the developed countries, capitalists started eyeing other less developed countries for newer markets. The ‘crony capitalists’ or the ‘robber barons’ of America (as capitalists like Rockefeller and Carnegie were called) shifted their attention to countries like Guatemala that had rich natural resources and cheap, plentiful labour. To gain maximum profits, they exploited the indigenous inhabitants of these countries and cleverly co-opted their ruling elites.

Marxism, thus, overlooks the many internal class and other social differences within the two main classes, that is, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. It vests too much confidence in the ability of the proletariat to unite and fight as a single entity devoid of any internal conflicts or clash of opinions. The emergence of newer classes and sub-classes makes it even more implausible for the proletariat around the world to rise in a major, earth-shaking revolution resulting in a utopian, classless society.
Capitalism, on the other hand, has cleverly reinvented itself by incorporating those elements of Marxist philosophy that it saw as being useful to its future propagation, thereby nullifying the Communist threat to a great extent, if not completely. Even so, “the economic dynamic of the stage that we live in” refurbishes the importance of Marxism and hence, a Marxist critique of global capitalism becomes a relevant exercise to undertake (Hardt 156).

There has been an intertwining of the project of Enlightenment and global free market over a period of time (John Gray, in Antonio 337). Though the human cost incurred by communism has been more than that brought about by the utopia of the global market economy, it is only a matter of time when the latter contends with the former in the suffering that it inflicts. Criticizing both modes of thought, Gray declares:

> In their cult of reason and efficiency, their ignorance of history and their contempt for the ways of life they consign to poverty or extinction, they embody the same rationalist hubris and cultural imperialism that have marked the central traditions of Enlightenment thinking throughout its history. (337)

He argues that the neoliberal vision of a unified global capitalism is as misguided as Marxist one-world communism. Nevertheless, the economic affairs of all nations have to be socio-culturally and politically regulated to provide some degree of stability and security to their citizens. The lack of any kind of political checks and balances would render today’s worldwide free market to melt down the same way that “its mid-Victorian precursor in England withered away” (340).

William Greider in his evocative essay, “These Dark Satanic Mills” presents a more humane view of the current state of affairs vis-à-vis the global free-trade economy and its repercussions. Describing in detail a 1993 fire in Bangkok, Thailand’s Kader Industrial Toy Company in which 188 workers died (out of which “all but fourteen of the dead were women, most of them young, some as young as thirteen years old”) and hundreds more were injured, he highlights the brutality and callousness of the multi-national corporations where they turn a blind eye to the terrible working conditions of their sweatshops (the outsourced workshops of multinational corporations that have their headquarters in the developed western countries) in poor, developing countries (328). As companies and governments steer
clear of shouldering any guilt or responsibility for such incidents, it is the easily-acquired, low-wage labour working in these factories that has to bear the brunt of it all. Worker protection is compromised to maximize corporate profits. This situation resembles that of nineteenth-century England where grisly working conditions in factory-houses made Blake refer to the latter as “dark satanic mills” (Greider). Though Marx also described similar harsh, degrading work, he saw the rise of counter forces and revolutionary movements by the oppressed working class. Grieder differs from Marx in that he emphasizes that neoliberal globalization paralyzes these forces and results in the shifting of all power to capital (317).

The shift from labour and production to culture and consumption is what differentiates the nineteenth-century industrial revolution in England (referred to as the ‘Great Transformation’ by John Gray) from current global capitalism (or Global Free Market). The former was characterized by the prominence of worker/labourer as forming a crucial part of the capitalist-worker-profit association, even as this relationship was an exploitative one. On the other hand, the contemporary global economy effaces the worker to a large extent, rendering him not just faceless and dispensable but also impotent by reinforcing differences based on race, class, religion and gender. It relies instead on the “liquid” ability of cash to cross international borders in a matter of milliseconds. Capital that transgresses boundaries far quicker than labour and has no race, ethnicity or religion to complicate matters, then assumes tremendous importance in a world of increasing human strife. The ability of capital to penetrate diverse cultures with ease and impunity suffuses this non-living entity with enormous power. This power is exploited by nations, corporations and individuals to further their interests and to consolidate their positions with respect to their competitors. Capital is the tool of cultural imperialism used by the first world powers to dominate and hegemonize the developing third world. Different cultures of the world are being homogenized and shaped in the form of the dominant culture. Thus, in the current global economy, capital replaces labour as the ruling metaphor. This decisive shift defines the contemporary epoch of globalization that is marked by uncertainty, instability and endless speculation.

It would be useful to trace the origins of the present situation to the time when the global financial institutions were created. The Bretton Woods Conference, held immediately after the World War II ended, assessed the damage caused and chalked
out an agenda whereby future wars could be avoided. It was decided by the participating countries that certain global institutions had to be created which would enable all countries of the world to have access to the world’s resources through global free trade and economic co-operation. Organizations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization (initially called GATT or General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) were the outcomes of this conference. These organizations were to look after the economic concerns of most countries around the world. But the workings of the former have not been transparent and unbiased, resulting in the skewed situation of a few rich countries enjoying an unparalleled share in the world market while leaving many third world countries further trapped in debt and misery. Arif Dirlik in his essay, “The Global in the Local” writes about the complex situation created by global capitalism:

What is ironic is that the managers of this world situation themselves concede the concentration of power in their (or their organizations’) hands; as well as their manipulation of peoples, boundaries and cultures to appropriate the local for the global, to admit different cultures into the realm of capital only to break them down and to remake them in accordance with the requirements of production and consumption. . . . Those who do not respond, or the ‘basket-cases’ which are not essential to those operations — four-fifths of the global population by their count — need not be colonized; they are simply marginalized. (Post-Colonial Studies Reader 466)

The current global economy does not use force or coercion against labour but through certain procedures of market forces makes it inevitable for the world’s labour (especially from developing countries) to fall into its trap. Appropriating the local for the global also results in the propagation of a dominant culture, thus, marginalizing local cultures. These local cultures consist of certain traditions, rituals and customs that are socially and culturally specific. Importantly, religion forms a crucial part of these local cultures.

Religion, stated Marx, provided the oppressed with a means to forget their misery for a certain while. He proclaims:
Religious suffering is at one and the same time the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. (qtd. in Wheen 57-58)

It is important to understand that Marx was not anti-religion and perceived religion to be only a social product and a creation of man himself. He believed that religion was a comforting abstraction for the oppressed which they turned to for spiritual succour when their material conditions were not met. Very often, the last line of his above-quoted statement – “It [religion] is the opium of the people” – is taken out of context and Marx is labelled as ‘anti-religion’. He, on the contrary, believed that condemning/ending religion will not affect the oppressed masses much but a change in the material social reality was essential to end human suffering.

In the present globalized world, religion has become a complex category. The wars which were fought for religious ideals are still being fought but the underpinnings have changed. The goal of retaining a pure, unadulterated and orthodox form of religion hides the smaller yet intense battles for reclaiming selfhood and identity through the collective force of religion. Behind the quest for a religious ideal lie the attempts at asserting one’s existence in a fast-changing, fragile world. The 9/11 attacks on America where Al Qaeda terrorists struck at the most strategically important symbols of America’s global power provide a potent example of how “the attacks were at once a new brand of terror, deeply indebted to globalization in both its outlook and its method, and something older: the extreme, opportunistic violence of marginal groups against national cultures during a period of general dislocation and uncertainty” (Western Civilizations 1062). The internal turmoil in the Islamic world in the latter half of the twentieth century continuing into the present century as well has manifested itself in radical political violence. The latter has not only increased in recent times but assumed a disturbing new character on coming into contact with the global networks of communication, finance and mobility. Capital, coupled with modern technology, becomes a double-edged sword; on the one hand, it challenges the traditional sway of religion and other world philosophies while on the other, it provides groups/communities with mechanisms to fight their individual and collective battles against discrimination and marginalization. The internet is a powerful tool that
influences the workings of the forces of power; it reverses the position of the subject and the object in significant ways, it constructs and deconstructs at the same time, it is a Panopticon turned on its head — an instrument that can be used by the supervisor on the supervised and vice-versa.

In the present stage of global capitalism, reverence for high ethics, values and morals is transferred onto the corporeality of the consumer product. Further, it is the “mind-boggling speed of circulation, of recycling, ageing, dumping and replacement which brings profit today — not the durability and lasting reliability of the product” (Bauman, Liquid Modernity 14). This has given way to a shrewd, dubious and shifty craftiness — a certain perversion of the spirit. The moral base of society has shifted, wringing instead a foundation of quicksand, forever changing at a dizzying speed. The giddy swelling and subsiding of human emotions in this roller-coaster ride of crests and troughs have yielded an uncertain mixture of warped ethics and an eroded moral fabric of society. As cultures absorb, repel or shun other cultures, hybridities both fascinating and terrifying come into being. A chaotic amalgam of countless human endeavours, sighs and forages into the unknown bring out the better and the worse in the human race. In this spinning wheel of religion, technology and capital, it is difficult to gauge which is the more urgent for the postmodern individual today.

With enhanced communication processes, running businesses across vast distances is easy, leading to the contraction of spaces. But this contracting of spaces has led to a stifling of personal spaces as well. The room to breathe freely has shrunk as an explosion in human population coupled with advanced means of communication leads to a trespassing of one another’s individual sovereignties. Zygmunt Bauman explains the remaking of inter-human relations in an existentialist “society of consumers” on a pattern similar to the relations between consumers and the objects of their consumption (Consuming Life 11). This transformation, he writes:

is a remarkable feat [that] has been achieved through the annexation and colonization by consumer markets of the space stretching between human individuals; that space in which the strings that tie humans together are plaited, and the fences that separate them are built. (11)

A ‘throw-away’ society of consumers has taken shape where the latter become mere pawns in the capitalist game of endless accumulation of wealth. Discussing a 2006 report in a leading British newspaper where readers are informed that “computer
systems are being used to snub you more effectively, depending on your value to the company you’re calling”, Bauman sums up the global culture of consumerism in his book, Consuming Life:

[Companies need a sort of ‘negative surveillance’, the Orwellian Big Brother style or a Panopticon-style surveillance in reverse, a sieve-like contraption which primarily serves the task of flushing the undesirables away and keeping the regulars in . . . of cutting out ‘flawed consumers’ — those weeds of the consumerist garden, people short of cash, credit cards and/or shopping enthusiasm, and otherwise immune to the blandishments of marketing. (4)

This exclusion of people who are not useful to companies by way of profits are then ostracized from the mainstream consumerist culture and rejected as cynics and failures. These ‘failed’ men and women are looked down upon as ‘anti-progress’ and ‘anti-development’ pessimists who are supposed to be averse to the onward civilizational march of humankind. They are mere hindrances to the inexorable journey of global capitalism, propped up by liberal democracy, which is then assumed to be the only and best available system.

II

In this critique of globalization through the textual analysis of the autobiographical narratives of Menchu, Janu, Riverbend and Ebadi, the theoretical framework that this thesis relies upon is predominantly Marxist, supplemented by the works of third world feminists like Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Haleh Afshar and Avtar Brah as also the ecofeminist approach of Vandana Shiva. It is pertinent to mention here that though I would be operating within a Marxist framework, I do not necessarily subscribe to his views on Communism and it being the best alternative system to replace Capitalism. In fact, I would be using Marx in a limited way to highlight the inequalities of a class society in the context of a globalized world that has gendered implications, resulting in women’s oppression. As mentioned before, the elements of ‘change’ and ‘radicalism’ that were once integral to Marxism will be invoked through the critical analyses of the selected texts. The personal struggles of the four women against patriarchal authorities are their individual revolutions, thus
rendering the personal as the political. Therefore, Marxism as the overarching methodology in its understanding of itself as a freedom from oppression, along with context-specific third world feminism form the theoretical underpinnings of this study.

Traditional Marxists have always insisted that “women’s oppression was rooted in capitalist social relations” and that “the analysis of patriarchy was a product of ‘bourgeois feminism’ and antithetical to class struggle” (Jackson and Jones 13). Marxist feminists, on the other hand, “recognised male domination as a systematic feature of modern society and did not . . . reduce women’s subordination to a side effect of capitalism” (13). Marxism was criticized because it could not explain “why women and men should not be exploited equally in the capitalist economy” (17). Also, Marxism only concerned itself with the wage labour in the market economy and did not consider the domestic labour performed by women. Subsequent Marxist feminists like Heidi Hartmann and Sylvia Walby explored the interconnections between capitalism and patriarchy in the structuring of labour markets (17). They argued that patriarchy existed as a distinct system of inequality alongside capitalism and that it was founded upon male control of women’s labour (18). Feminist Social Theory in the 1990s, however, has shifted its attention from systems to processes; instead of analyzing totalizing social structures like capitalism, it now focuses on the material condition of women’s lives in varied and different contexts. Thus, there has “been a move away from ‘grand theory’ which seeks to explain all aspects of women’s subordination [to] forms of theory which are sensitive to local contexts and to differences among women” (27).

In her groundbreaking essay, “Under Western Eyes” written in 1986, Mohanty questioned the construction of the “third world woman” as a “singular monolith subject” by Western feminism — a “homogeneous social category” in which the average third world woman was essentialized as “sexually constrained”, “poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.” (1991: 56). This ideological and stereotypical formation of all third world women as a single category overlooked the “historically specific material reality of groups of women” and generalized them as “powerless”, “exploited” and “sexually harassed” (56). Mohanty criticized the assumption of “an ahistorical, universal unity between women based on a generalized notion of their subordination” (64). Instead of considering women as “socioeconomic political groups within particular local contexts”, such analyses tended to “limit the definition of the female subject to gender identity”,...
thereby, “completely bypassing social class and ethnic identities” (64). In the process, it creates binaries such as “people who have it [power] (read: men), and people who do not (read: women). Men exploit, women are exploited” (64). Debunking such “simplistic formulations” as “historically reductive”, Mohanty called for “careful, politically focused, local analyses” of third world women’s lives that took into consideration the many contradictions, differences and specificities of women’s location within various structures (64-5). This would, she emphasized, help in the building of an oppositional political strategy whence third world women would not simply be portrayed as “mere victims of the production process, because they resist, challenge, and subvert the process at various junctures” (65).

After almost two decades, in a changed global economic and political order, Mohanty revisits her seminal work. In the essay, “Under Western Eyes” Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles’, she redefines her intention—a commitment to building connections between feminist scholarship and political organizing (2003: 230). In the context of a changed global order, she stresses upon the need to focus on “the politics and economics of capitalism as a far more urgent locus of struggle” that requires being attentive to the “micropolitics of everyday life as well as to the macropolitics of global economic and political processes” (230). She calls for an anticapitalist transnational feminist practice that draws on historical materialism and centralizes racialized gender (231). This analysis is anchored in the place of the most marginalized communities of women and provides an inclusive paradigm for thinking about social justice (231). She envisages an “anti-imperialist, anticapitalist and contextualized feminist project to expose and make visible the various overlapping forms of subjugation of women’s lives” (236). Describing globalization as an “epoch of borderlessness” (172), she writes:

Globalization is a slogan, an overused and underunderstood concept, and characterizes real shifts and consolidation of power around the world. Institutions, and people in power, rule and maintain inequality in part by hiding or mystifying the workings of power. (171)

In this regard, Vandana Shiva, an ecofeminist and a prominent leader of the anti-globalization movement, promulgates an experiential and epistemological critique of the intellectual property rights agreements of the WTO, biopiracy and the privileging of corporate commercial interests over indigenous knowledge traditions and ways of
life. She questions the sanctity of science and development, claiming that “these are not universal categories of progress, but the special projects of modern western patriarchy” (Staying Alive xiv). She argues that the Enlightenment Project of the eighteenth-century gave rise to the “theory of progress” which in turn was based on “the sacredness of two categories: modern scientific knowledge and economic development” (xiv). The relentless pursuit of progress and development that ensued from this doctrine destroyed life on the planet, thus substituting “the sanctity of life” with “the sanctity of science and development” (xiv). This destruction of nature further led to a subsequent loss of the life-support systems of poor, rural and tribal women in the third world who have always depended heavily on nature for drawing sustenance for themselves, their families and their societies, thereby threatening their very survival (xvi). Shiva asserts that the “violence against nature and women is built into the very mode of perceiving both, and forms the basis of the current development paradigm” (xvi). Having been personally involved with women’s struggles for survival in India over many years, her vision is “informed both by the suffering and insights of those who struggle to sustain and conserve life, and whose struggles question the meaning of a progress, a science, a development which destroys life and threatens survival” (xiv). She voices her concern thus:

The death of nature is central to this threat to survival. The earth is rapidly dying: her forests are dying, her soils are dying, her waters are dying. Tropical forests, the creators of the world’s climate, the cradle of the world’s vegetational wealth, are being bull-dozed, burnt, ruined or submerged. (xv)

Shiva traces the causes behind the increased impoverishment of women to the colonial rule and points out that the privatization of land for revenue generation led to the displacement of women and erosion of their traditional land use rights (3). The replacing of subsistence crops by cash crops undermined food production, leading to a worsening of the condition of women, children, the aged and the infirm (3). The situation was aggravated by the fact that the men either migrated to other places in search of better incomes or were conscripted into forced labour by the colonizers (3). Migration in large numbers to the West Indian/Caribbean countries as indentured labour also took place during the colonial rule. The women as wives/mothers/daughters left behind were forced to fend for themselves.
Elaborating upon the concept of “maldevelopment” as a “new source of male-female inequality”, Shiva argues that “development is essentially maldevelopment” (5-6). She asserts that under this model of maldevelopment, “commodities have grown but nature has shrunk” (5). The dominant modes of perception under such a model are based on “reductionism, duality and linearity” that exclude the diverse forms and activities of different communities and cultures (5). Violence to nature in the form of the ecological crisis and violence to women in the form of their subjugation and exploitation, results in nature and women being turned into passive objects (6). The inevitable outcome of this capitalist patriarchal process is that:

From being the creators and sustainers of life, nature and women are reduced to being ‘resources’ in the fragmented, anti-life model of maldevelopment. (6)

Shiva also puts forward her concept of ‘Nature’ as ‘Prakriti’, the “inherently active, powerful, productive force in the dialectic of the creation, renewal and sustenance of all life” (38). This conception of ‘Nature’, manifested in both animate and inanimate objects, is “an expression of Shakti, the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos” (38). ‘Prakriti’ in conjunction with the masculine principle, ‘Purusha’, creates the world (38). She elucidates further by asserting that ‘Nature’ is a creative expression of the feminine principle and is in “ontological continuity with humans as well as above them” (40). By this, she obfuscates the real divide between “man and nature” or between “man and woman” as all life originates from the feminine principle (40). Explicating her views further, she proclaims that “contemporary western views of nature are fraught with the dichotomy and duality between man and woman, and person and nature” (40). On the other hand, in Indian cosmology, “person and nature (Purusha-Prakriti) are a duality in unity” (40). There is no dichotomy between the two as:

They are inseparable complements of one another in nature, in woman, in man. Every form of creation bears the sign of this dialectical unity, of diversity with a unifying principle, and this dialectical harmony between the male and female principles and between nature and man, becomes the basis of ecological thought in India. (40)
As opposed to ‘Nature’ as the feminine principle, characterized by creativity, activity, productivity and diversity, the Cartesian or Enlightenment concept of nature sees it as “environment” or even worse, as a “resource” (40). In this view, the environment is seen as being separate from man; it is his surrounding, not his substance (40). This dualism has given rise to a narrow world-view in which nature is seen as passive, uniform, mechanistic, “separable and fragmented within itself”, “separate from man” and “inferior, to be dominated and exploited by man” (40-1).

And with this conception of ‘Prakriti’ as the manifestation of the feminine principle and the subjugation of nature by man under the reductionist Cartesian concept, Shiva makes an important connection — that of violence against nature being linked to the violation and marginalization of women, especially in the developing third world. Terming the shift from “Prakriti” to “resource”, from “Terra Mater” to “matter” as “regressive and violent”, Shiva writes:

For women, whose productivity in the sustaining of life is based on nature’s productivity, the death of Prakriti is simultaneously a beginning of their marginalisation, devaluation, displacement and ultimate dispensability. The ecological crisis, is at its root, the death of the feminine principle. (42)

The destruction of forest ecosystems as a result of scientific masculinist forestry is to be condemned since it hurts mainly women and tribals as they depend heavily on the diverse resource functions of the forests for their survival (Shiva 63). As an alternative, one may endorse the “feminine forestry science” wherein “forests are not viewed as merely a stock of wood, isolated from the rest of the ecosystem” but “as the primary source of life and fertility” (Shiva 64). The Chipko movement in the Garhwal hills of the Himalayas in the 1970s was an exemplary women’s movement for forest conservation. It was a struggle for protecting forests which were not only a vital source of food, fuel and fodder for these women but also the “highest expression of the earth’s fertility and productivity” (Shiva 56).

There has been much criticism of this view, however, as it is believed to contribute to “an ideology of patriarchy reductionism” (Dietrich, in Menon 79). Linking patriarchy as a “full-fledged mechanism of exploitation” to the “Renaissance” and to the “scientific revolution”, this conception ignores the “much earlier roots of patriarchy in antiquity” and overlooks the crucial connections between caste, class and patriarchy (Dietrich, in Menon 78).
Shiva’s important contribution to ecofeminism in exploring the links between different ways of thinking about development, the processes of developmental change, and the impact of these on the environment and on the people dependent upon it for their livelihood is acknowledged by many critics, yet a few analytical problems do exist in her argument (Agrawal, in Menon 102). The first of them is that though Shiva’s examples relate to rural women primarily from the north-west of India (particularly her drawing upon her experience of working with women activists in the Chipko movement), “her generalizations conflate all Third World women into one category”, thereby ignoring the differentiations based on caste, class, race and ecological zones, and hence, essentializing women as such (in Menon 102). The second problem with Shiva’s argument is her conception of the feminine principle as based on Indian cosmology or Indian philosophic discourse that “relates to the Hindu discourse alone and cannot be seen as applicable for Indians of all religious persuasions” (103); more importantly, it is unclear in which historical period the concept of the feminine principle in practice affected gender relations or relations between people and nature (104). Thirdly, Shiva does not take into account the pre-colonial histories of natural resource use in third world countries. She broadly attributes existing forms of destruction of nature and the oppression of women mainly to “the Third World’s history of colonialism and to the imposition of Western science and a Western model of development” (104). Agrawal instead proposes her own idea of a “feminist environmentalism” in which both the ideological and material bases of the relationship between nature and women would be addressed (106).

In the light of the above critiques of Shiva’s work, what emerges is the need to engage deeper with the workings of patriarchy, especially in view of the changed global political and economic order. Capitalism, as is understood in terms of a particular mode of production, beginning in the nineteenth-century England and spreading to other parts of the world soon after, and capitalism as an ideology with all its political implications, is a resulting conception of the Enlightenment thinking of the West. Going no further into an analysis of the connections between the two here, one would tend to agree with Shiva that it was the Cartesian worship of ‘Progress’ and ‘Reason’ that led to the birth and consequent sanctifying of ‘modern scientific knowledge’ and ‘economic development’ as evident in the capitalist mode of production.
The links between ‘patriarchy’ as “the oldest of oppressions” (Shiva 1988:3) and ‘capitalism’ as a factory mode of production, have been made by some Marxist feminists such as Christine Delphy, Sylvia Walby and Heidi Hartmann. Hartmann uses a historical analysis to argue that the development of capitalism within societies which were already patriarchal had consequences for gender divisions in both the home and the workplace (in Jackson and Jones 18). She explains how during the nineteenth century, organized working-class men used their social advantage to exclude women from most of the well paid, skilled occupations and thus marginalized them in the labour market (18). A vicious circle was established as women’s disadvantage in the labour market made them dependent on marriage for survival. Within marriage, housework and childcare became their primary responsibilities. The burden of domestic work disabled them to compete with men in the labour market on equal terms, thus “compounding their original disadvantage” (18).

This analysis can also be applied, with some reservations, to the present inequalities of the international division of labour. The current global economy does not work in a dissimilar way to create divisions and inequalities between men and women on a world scale. Third world women have been the hardest hit due to the biased division of labour where men are favoured for better paying occupations and given preference for socially superior positions across different fields, right from a CEO to a factory worker. Women, on the other hand, are forced to settle for much less as most private enterprises and companies in the fluid global economy give employment on a temporary or contractual basis. And most prefer to employ women in these positions as they are thought to be easily dispensable and also easier to exploit in terms of lower wages/salaries. This tendency can be attributed to the unarticulated policy followed by multinational corporations around the world — ‘least of responsibility’ and ‘minimum of accountability’ — resulting in bare minimum worker protection policies and extremely negligible social safety net for women workers. Women coming from economically weaker sections find work as factory-workers and get employed in sweatshops where they are forced to work in difficult conditions for meagre wages. They also get absorbed in lowly paid occupations in unorganized sectors like building and construction work where they are exploited in terms of lower wage rates and their easy dispensability. Many of them work as domestic workers in middle and upper class households where they are vulnerable to economic as well as sexual exploitation; others end up becoming unsuspecting
victims of trafficking and prostitution. Moreover, amongst the third world women, there are many distinctions based on class, caste, religion and ethnicity (as elaborated above in context of Mohanty’s views). These differences compound the situation of these women further when they become entangled with the dominant modes of patriarchy and capitalism.

A reworking of the Marxist theoretical paradigm along with situating third world women’s experiences in their specific contexts is a major concern of my study. The four texts that I analyze conform to a context-specific analytic and though each woman protagonist in these autobiographical narratives belongs to a vastly different socio-cultural background, their experiences as women and as subalterns makes them share a common subjective history. Significantly, these women do not suffer in silence but speak up about the injustices meted out to them by oppressive ruling elites. Through their actions in resisting their oppressors, they exhibit the radicalism that is vital for bringing about change not only in their individual lives but also in the entire communities that they represent. Narrating their life stories in the form of testimonios (oral testimonies that are transcribed by another person), memoirs and blogs is a form of voicing resistance. The potency of the published word is evident in the wide international interest and sympathy that these works have yielded, transforming these women’s local-bound battles for justice and equality into a “grassroots globalization” (Appadurai, qtd. in Nagar 278). These self narratives also play a very important function in bridging the ever-widening gap between theory and praxis in academia across the world. This latter aspect will also be dealt with in greater detail in the subsequent chapters.

III

A formal introduction of the four selected autobiographical narratives belonging to women representative of their respective socio-cultural milieu is in order. In the first chapter, Rigoberta Menchu’s ethnographic account of the lives of the Guatemalan Quiche Indians and their political repression under despotic regimes in her memoir entitled, I, Rigoberta Menchu, is analyzed. In this narrative, she lays bare the brutal racist system based on capitalist-property relations of complicit American and Guatemalan ruling elites. It is the torturing and killing of her brother, father and mother by the Guatemalan Military Government and the genocidal
slaughter of the Mayan community that leads Menchu to launch a strong resistance movement against her alleged tormentors. She renounces marriage and motherhood to devote her life to the cause of getting justice for her people. She educates herself and mobilizes the entire Indian community, raising awareness about the “internal colonialism” practiced by their oppressors, the “ladinos” (those born out of intermixing of the Spanish and the Indian peoples), who dominate the Guatemalan government. It is a “history of lived experiences, an autobiographical redaction” that San Juan Jr. considers as “mutating into a unique practice of dissent combining both alternative and oppositional stances” (37).

In the second chapter, another aspect of globalization – its ramifications on ecology and the disruption of tribal peoples’ lives staying in close, harmonious relationship with nature is the subject of analysis. The tentacles of multi-national corporations (MNCs) are spread everywhere, exploiting the natural resources of third world countries. Patenting seeds, monopolizing water and appropriating the indigenous peoples’ knowledge of nature, these MNCs take away their livelihoods. Succumbing to pressures from these corporations, the national and state governments are forced to allot them fertile pieces of land for commercial farming, thereby displacing and dislocating the indigenous people in the process. For instance, the tribal Adiyar community of Kerala has been forced to vacate the lands that they had been tilling for centuries and made to live in ‘colonies’ built by the State Government, uprooting them from their natural home, their ‘Mother Forest’. They are treated as labourers whose only function is to work the fields for the ‘jenmi’ or their landlords at the minimum wage rate. C.K. Janu in her memoir, Mother Forest narrates her struggle to wage a protest movement against the Kerala Government to get back their fertile, forest lands that were taken away from them on the pretext of making wildlife sanctuaries.

Another facet of globalization, namely, neo-imperialism and its impact on women is scrutinized in the third chapter. The “insidious intent” behind America’s war on Iraq (the justification for the war ostensibly had been the weapons of mass destruction that Saddam Hussein supposedly had) and the subsequent rhetoric of bringing democracy to Iraq is revealed in all its ugliness in Riverbend’s Baghdad Burning. An ordinary, upper middle-class, twenty-five year old female blogger writes about the experience of witnessing a war right in her backyard – the shattering of
windowpanes when a bomb explodes nearby, the palpitations, the sweating of palms, the near-death experiences. She exposes the hypocrisy of the American Government when she writes about the shameful Abu-Ghraib prison scandal and the numerous atrocities on Iraqi civilians. The Iraqi women fear stepping outside their houses as many of them face abduction in broad daylight by gangs of religious extremists who flourish in a chaotic atmosphere. Preferring to remain anonymous, this young woman uses one of the ‘miracles’ of globalization, that is, the internet to launch a scathing attack on American neo-imperialist policies – the real war being the ‘war for oil’ in the Gulf region. In the post-war period, the major reconstruction projects like managing of Iraqi natural resources (oil and natural gas) were given by the Iraqi Governing Council to American multi-national companies like Halliburton and Bechtel which had prominent officials of the Bush administration like the American Vice-President, Dick Cheney, on its board of directors. The vested interests of the ruling elites left the Iraqi people without much share in their nation’s natural wealth, leading to a growing sense of frustration and rise in insurgency. The debilitating effects of twelve years of economic sanctions imposed by the US on Iraq after the first Gulf War have been exacerbated by this second spate of American militarist aggression, leading to a civil-war like situation. The collapsing of the health-care system in Iraq after the first Gulf War resulted in high maternal and infant mortality rates while the second attack destroyed the little modicum of security and order that was left, leaving women exposed to an increasingly unsafe civil situation.

The fourth chapter is an analysis of Shirin Ebadi’s Iran Awakening to exposit the cultural manifestations of globalization. The 1979 Iranian Revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeinei, a Shi’ite cleric and fiery demagogue, was inspired by the vision of a Republic based on the tenets of ‘pure’ Islam. It was a reaction against the excesses of the previous regime of Mohammed Reza Pahlawi, the Shah of Iran who was seen by the Iranian people as a stooge of the West. He had regained power by overthrowing Mossadegh (a popular statesman) in a coup d’état staged in 1953 with America’s help. The reason for America’s support of the Shah’s regime was its insatiable hunger for oil which was accordingly fed by the Shah by allowing American multi-national oil companies easy access to Iran’s oil resources, thus encouraging a kind of globalization. Also, under his regime, dissent was ruthlessly
suppressed and women were compulsorily made to unveil in an attempt to suddenly modernize a hitherto conservative society. Even though he had brought some important reforms to improve Iranian women’s status, he became a hugely unpopular figure. The increasing resentment against his rule was taken advantage of by fundamentalist Shia clerics who seized upon this wave of public restlessness, giving it a religious tenor. The Iranian Revolution was ushered in 1979, making Iran an Islamic Republic and the rigid ‘Sharia’ (Legal system based on Islamic tenets) was imposed under which women were forced to wear the ‘hijab’ as a symbol of religious devotion. Women’s rights related to marriage, child custody, divorce and inheritance were taken away and regressive laws introduced in their place. Thus, the rise of a fundamentalist Islam which is not only a reaction to globalization but also proof of the growing existential turmoil in the Islamic world, has led to a curbing of Iranian women’s rights and freedoms. In this scenario, Shirin Ebadi continues her struggle to introduce amendments in the rigid Islamic Law, thus reforming it to make it more gender-sensitive.

The voicing of resistance through self narratives is a strategy of opposition to certain forms of domination. Chandra Talpade Mohanty draws an important distinction between the traditional Anglo-American autobiographies of women and the revolutionary testimonials of Latin American women (1991: 37). Whereas the former speak for their communities, the latter speak from within their communities (37). She also asserts that the “idea of plural or collective consciousness” is an integral part of the testimonios of the Latin American women (37). Another significant aspect of these testimonios is that they are “strikingly nonheroic and impersonal” (37). Unlike the hegemonic tradition of European modernist autobiography, the testimonios do not focus on the “unfolding of a singular woman’s consciousness” (37). Rather, they “speak from within a collective, as participants in revolutionary struggles, and to speak with the express purpose of bringing about social and political change” (37). They directly address or speak to the reader “in order to invite and precipitate change (revolution)” (37). By taking the reader into confidence, these testimonios are able to solicit empathy and support. Resistance, asserts Mohanty, is not always identified through organized protest movements (38). Many a time,
[r]esistance is encoded in the practices of remembering, and of writing. Agency is thus figured in the minute, day-to-day practices and struggles of third world women. . . . The very practice of remembering against the grain of “public” or hegemonic history, of locating the silences and the struggle to assert knowledge which is outside the parameters of the dominant, suggests a rethinking of sociality itself. (38-9)

In expressing resistance against the oppressive forces or the hegemon, one instrument that has proved to be highly useful is the internet. This ‘gift of globalization’ has been phenomenal in helping people living under dictatorships or repressive regimes or even citizens of war-ravaged countries (such as Riverbend in this context) express their views, opinions and emotions freely through weblogs or social networking sites. The recent revolutions in the Middle-East, beginning from Tunisia and Egypt and spreading to engulf most of the Islamic Middle-Eastern countries is an evidence of this kind of internet-driven mass mobilization through social networking sites like ‘facebook’. These are novel ways of voicing dissent that can revolutionize local-bound struggles as also large-scale anti-globalization movements that are already taking place in major cities of the world.

Internet is the defining ‘instrument/mode of communication’ of the era of globalization in the same way that ‘capital’ is its defining metaphor. As explicated in the beginning, internet influences the working of power in remarkable ways. It is like a Panopticon in reverse; the object here can become the subject and vice-versa. The original Panopticon, as envisaged by Jeremy Bentham in the eighteenth-century, was “an architectural device featuring a central point — a tower — that gives the prison warden a full view of the entire circle of the building’s honeycomb structure, whereas those under surveillance, who are housed in separate, individual cells, are seen without seeing the person who observes them” (Mattelart 7). This concept of the Panopticon was taken up by Michel Foucault in 1975 in his book Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison and proclaimed to be constituting the “paradigm of disciplinary society” — the “deep, solid substratum that continues to exert its power over society today” (qtd. in Mattelart 7). This model of Panopticon as developed by Foucault introduced an important new aspect, that is, that in a surveillance society, discipline is exercised over the bodies of individuals with their complicity, since those
who are subjected to it are “caught in a situation of power which they themselves support” (qtd. in Mattelart 7).

This last aspect has been further dealt with in greater detail by critics like Noam Chomsky, who through his popular idea of “manufactured consent” asserts that the subjected are actually complicit with the authorities wielding power through the consent they give to the latter willingly and consciously, though not knowing at the same time that this constitutes their own oppression. But internet helps in changing power equations considerably. Employing internet as a tool of expressing dissent, women like Riverbend change the relationship between the supervisor and the supervised to a great extent. By writing her own blog and voicing her views and opinions freely, she advocates a new approach to the articulation of agency. Her position of being a war-affected Iraqi citizen is now co-existent with her position of a trenchant critic of American foreign policy with respect to the war on Iraq. Therefore, she becomes both the supervised and the supervisor. She is also the object of violence and at the same time the speaking subject herself. The internet therefore becomes a Panopticon-in-reverse and the hegemon is now brought under the ‘gaze’ of the subaltern subject. This helps in shedding light on the actual situation inside the war zone as opposed to the sanitized and many times, biased reporting by both national and international news agencies. Riverbend’s blog is therefore not only an invaluable and crucial source of information on the ground reality inside a war zone but a sensitive personal reportage of a war experienced first hand. It is also a special form of war literature that is as real as the medium of the internet is virtual.

Bringing together diverse strands of experiential and contextual subjectivity, as explicated through the narratives of the afore-mentioned women through an analysis that is based on the specific histories of their resistance and struggles, an attempt is made to highlight the elements of ‘agency’ and ‘change’ that form a significant part of the lives of these women. As the processes of globalization become more deeply embedded, both materially and ideologically, threatening the very survival of some communities while fragmenting others, it becomes imperative to locate the various intersections of the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ to understand the workings of oppressive power structures and devise methods to challenge the same.

End Notes