CHAPTER – II

A Feminist Approach

Feminist Theories: Political & Literary

Feminism may be broadly defined as an organized movement that promotes equality for women alongside men in political, economic, social, cultural and personal spheres. All feminists irrespective of the varying theories they follow believe that women are oppressed by men due to their sex based on the dominant ideology of patriarchy. Patriarchy has existed from times immemorial but feminism per se evolved much later. This chapter briefly covers the rise and spread of feminism in the Western world and its impact on women and society.

Feminist political theory sees women and their situation as central to political analysis. It questions why, in all societies men appear to have power over women and how this can be changed.

Feminism attends to the power relations inscribed in the areas patriarchal history treats as incidental- sexuality, private life, personal relations and cultural differences. ¹

Though Feminism as a definite term came into use in England during the 1880’s, indicating support for women’s equal legal and political rights with men, records show that the implications of this term were felt right from the sixteenth century. Initially, women ventured to have their say only in matters of religion. They wrote polemics on the depiction of women in the Bible and argued that the Bible in fact portrayed the woman as an equal. As early as 1589 Jane Anger observed that the woman was purer as she was created from the man’s rib, while Adam was created from dust.

The creation of man and woman, at the first he being formed… of dross and filthy clay did so remain until
God saw that in him his workmanship was good and therefore by the transformation of the dust which was loathsome unto flesh it became purified. Then lacking a help for him, God, making woman of man’s flesh that she might be purer than he, doth evidently show how far we women are more excellent than men. ²

In a way women went back to the very source that patriarchs have used to justify the oppression of women-Genesis. In this initial period ‘feminism’ was a feature predominant in the field of religion and culture.

The 18th century saw an increase in women's literacy and a corresponding rise in the number of female readers and writers. Although poetry and drama remained primarily male preserves, the novel had a number of female practitioners like Fanny Burney, Sarah Fielding, Amelia Opie, and Elizabeth Inchbald. Ann Radcliffe, author of The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794) and The Italian (1797), was a favorite and is now considered the best of the Gothic writers. From literature, this independence also moved on to culture. Gradually women became more aware of their rights in the family as well as in society and started organized movements to demand these rights giving birth to the concept of feminism.

With the rise of feminism, feminist theories also started developing. Today there exist many feminist theories and they are as vast and far-reaching as can be imagined. The various feminist theories follow different schools of thought with each giving a different reason for the oppression of women. However they are unanimous in their objective of making women more independent and self confident and freeing them from the clutches of patriarchy. Incidentally, by allowing various schools of feminist thought to co exist equally, feminist theory demonstrates its dislike of patriarchal hierarchization. Jill Dolan explains as to why feminism is so diverse a field.
Since feminism is not a monolithic discourse with a cohesive party line its modes of criticism take multiple forms. Some borrow from sociology, some from psychoanalysis, others from Post Structuralist and Deconstructive strategies.  

Diversity in fact is the unique identity of the feminist schools of thought. Many feminist theories have evolved over the years which bring the added awareness that the construction of women’s experience has never been adequate vis-à-vis the varied sectors of human experience.

Feminist theory reconsiders historical, economic, religious, biological, artistic and anthropological constructs and explanations. It brings to consciousness facets of our experience as women that have hitherto escaped attention because they have not been part of, and may even have contradicted predominant theoretical accounts of human life.

Given below are a few significant feminist theories that have radicalized the whole concept of feminism.

1) Liberal Feminism: Mary Wollstonecraft, wife of the radical philosopher William Godwin and mother of novelist Mary Shelley, is generally regarded as the first English feminist author. Her *A Vindication of The Rights of Women* was the first written work that elaborated on difficulties faced by women in the late eighteenth century. Before this period women had no legal or economic rights including rights in marriage and children. The book published in 1792 is regarded as a watershed in the history of feminism and feminist theory and became the groundwork for the oldest school of feminist thought viz. Liberal Feminism.

This is the most traditional and basic form of feminism that challenges the belief that women are intellectually and physically less capable than men. The most important goal of the Liberal Feminist is women’s liberation through sexual equality.
It aims to free women from oppressive gender roles that patriarchal society has confined to women viz. women considered capable of certain occupations like teaching and nursing, while considered incapable of ‘higher’ tasks like ruling and preaching. Mary Wollstonecraft advocated equal educational rights for women to raise their moral and intellectual stature and to make them rational citizens. She believed a woman had to be not only strong in mind and body but also be educated, follow reason and rationality. The main view of these feminists is that all people, men and women are created equal by God and deserve equal rights. Women are oppressed because of the way men and women are socialized which keeps men in power positions. In *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism*, Zillah Eisenstein observes that the economic and social position of women was in decline especially after the late eighteenth century. Before this, women did indulge in productive labour in and around the house but with the beginning of Industrialism, women, especially married bourgeois women had no incentive to work either within or outside the home making them subordinate to their earning male partners.

Liberal feminists believe that feminist subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints that block women’s entrance in the so called public world. As its name suggests this school of thought aims at liberating women by championing not only equal legal, political and educational rights for women but also equality in the fields of employment and political participation.

John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor, writing about a century after Wollstonecraft, continued the viewpoints of the Liberal Feminists. They believed that to achieve sexual equality, society must not only give women the same education as men but also provide the same civil liberties and economic opportunities that men enjoy.
Betty Friedan is one of the most vociferous Liberal feminists of the twentieth century. In her book *The Feminine Mystique* she exploded the myth that women find satisfaction in the traditional roles of wife and mother. She elaborated that being exclusively confined to these roles, women were left feeling empty and miserable and the solution was to work outside the home. Thus, a woman could fulfill not only her wifely and motherly duties but also her professional duties. The focus in this school of thought is more on the public sphere involving women rather than the private. Like Wollstonecraft, Taylor and Mill, Friedan too believed in sending women out into the public realm without summoning men into the private domain.

Though premised upon the perception that women as a group are now disadvantaged, it argues that it is up to individual women to make the most of their opportunities once legal and political equality have been won. Liberal feminism has often been criticized as a primitive feminism that is superficial, doing nothing to deconstruct deeper ideologies of women’s suppression. Nonetheless it still remains as a basis for various feminist theories. Rosemarie Tong aptly sums up the groundbreaking contribution of the Liberal feminists.

We owe to liberal feminists many, if not most of the educational and legal reforms that have improved the quality of life for women. It is doubtful that without liberal feminists’ efforts, so many women could have attained their newfound professional and occupational stature.5

II) Marxist Feminism: The rise of Industrialism in Europe gave rise to capitalism and subsequently birth to communism in the mid nineteenth century. The period saw radical philosophical theories coming from communists like Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. In their book *Das Kapital*, they accused Capitalism of being the main culprit for the subordination of the poor. Though not great supporters of the cause of
women’s rights, they believed that gender oppression would end once class oppression was overcome.

Marxist Feminism takes as its basis the Marxist theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, but modifies it to include not the poor working class, but women as victims. The clarion call of the Marxist feminist is Economic Revolution leading to Women’s Liberation. They think attacking patriarchy is inadequate and one should also consider the material conditions that support this ideology. They believe that opposition between man and woman is not a biological given but a social construct and women’s oppression is not so much as the intentional actions of individuals but as the product of the political, economic and social structures associated with capitalism.

Some Marxist feminists purport the root cause of female subordination to private property and capitalism. Engels in *The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State* wrote at length about the role of property in modern family and civilization and projected the woman as an unpaid worker in the family, where she produces heirs in exchange for board and lodging. Heidi Hartmann insists that

> …patriarchy has its basis in male control of female labor power… asserted through a variety of institutions including heterosexual, monogamous marriage, childbearing and rearing and domestic work.⁶

Marxist feminists believe that earlier, women were oppressed by patriarchy but after the Industrial Revolution, they were doubly oppressed with ‘capitalist patriarchy’ wherein men’s domination over women extended from the home to the workplace. They thus focus on the intersection between women’s experience as workers and their position in the family. Their main argument is that economic dependency is the basis of women’s oppression. Michele Barrett in her essay *Women’s Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis* states that ‘women’s oppression is entrenched in the structure of capitalism’ and women would
be liberated only if this disappears. Eli Zaretsky reemphasized that the liberation of women required the elimination of capitalism.

Marxism believes that the fact that we produce our means of subsistence makes us human. Richard Schmitt elaborated that ‘men and women through production collectively create a society that in turn shapes them’. Marxist feminists like Nancy Holmstrom believe that the nature of woman’s work makes her form an image of herself wherein she considers herself socially and economically subordinate to man, creating a sense of alienation within her, making her lose her sense of self. The remedy for this according to Ann Foreman is that Marxist Feminism should create a world in which women experience themselves as whole persons rather than fragmented beings. Marxist feminists are optimistic that if woman’s status and function changes in the workplace, her status and function in the household will also change. Marxist feminism is more practical in that it agrees that changes cannot be achieved simply by demanding justice but only in specific historical circumstances.

III) Radical Feminism: The idea that the ‘public’ extends to the ‘personal’ and both are instruments of patriarchy began to develop as a self-conscious theory in the 1960’s. Radical feminists believe that women’s oppression is the first, the most widespread and deepest form of human oppression. They blame men rather than society or social and economic conditions for women’s oppressive situation. According to Radical Feminists, the Liberal and Marxist feminist theories ignored the nature and ubiquity of male power. It believes that men’s patriarchal power over women is the primary power relationship in human society and this power is not confined only to the public world but even characterizes the most intimate relationship. “Personal is Political” became the war cry of these modern feminists
who argued that not only legal, political and economic systems, but family, church and educational institutes also needed a makeover.

Like Marxist feminists they too believe in the abolition of the neutral bourgeois family that reemphasises the subordination of women. However, they blame Patriarchy rather than Capitalism as being more responsible for women’s oppression and advocate a woman’s culture- distinct and separate from the dominant patriarchal culture that privileged men.

Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1970) provided a starting point for many theories concerning radical feminist thought. She gave a whole new meaning to the term ‘patriarchy’, stressing that patriarchal ideology exaggerates biological differences between men and women, making certain that men always have “masculine” roles and women “feminine”. For her the principles of patriarchy were two fold wherein ‘male shall dominate female and elder male shall dominate younger’. Thereby male domination over females spread to all areas of life: personal, educational, social, biological and cultural. She argued that sex is political mainly because the male female relationship is the paradigm for all power relationships.

Social caste supersedes all other forms of inequalitarianism: racial, political or economic, and unless the clinging to male supremacy as a birthright is finally foregone, all systems of oppression will continue to function simply by virtue of their logical and emotional mandate in the primary human situation. 

The main focus of Radical feminists is on the ways in which men attempt to control women’s bodies to serve their needs and interests. According to Shulamith Firestone patriarchy is rooted in biological inequality, and reproduction was the main reason for the subordination of women. She stressed that women’s liberation would come with biological liberation in which women had complete knowledge about their bodies and had control over reproduction through technology. For her, biological
motherhood was a negative concept as it inflicted pain on women. However feminists like Mary O’Brien and Adrienne Rich insist that woman’s reproductive powers can be a source of liberation freeing her from the control of men and that if women took control of child bearing and child rearing they would realize the pleasures of biological motherhood. Critics believe that though Radical Feminism is not flawless, it has given us new perspectives on the oppression of women.

The insight that sexuality is the root cause of women’s oppression is vital to any woman seeking to understand her personal and political position in society.¹⁸

IV) Psychoanalytic Feminist Theory: This theory takes as its source the works of Sigmund Freud and his psychoanalytic theories. Freud gave the concept that gender differences are not biological but based on the psychosexual development of the individual. Initially he was regarded by most feminists as anti women. Freud’s claim that “Anatomy is Destiny” enraged feminists. Liberal feminist Betty Friedan and Radical feminists Shulamith Firestone and Kate Millett attacked Freud’s theories arguing that women’s inferior social position and powerlessness had more to do with the social construction of femininity rather than biology.

Juliet Mitchell however ‘rehabilitated’ Freud as an important contributor to feminism. Freud, she argued, did not claim that women were biologically inferior to men, but offered a scientific means as to understanding why women were constructed as such in a patriarchal society.

The greater part of the feminist movement has identified Freud as the enemy. Psychoanalysis is seen as the justification for the status quo, bourgeois and patriarchal. A rejection of psychoanalysis and of Freud’s work is fatal for feminism….. Psychoanalysis is not a recommendation for a patriarchal society but an analysis of one.⁹
Reemphasising this argument, Psychoanalytic feminists like Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray maintain that gender inequality comes from early childhood experiences that makes men believe they are masculine and women believe they are feminine. Mary Wollstonecraft attacked the "cultural conditioning" of girls wherein girls were trained from childhood to be fearful and fragile and were brought up on the notion that within marriage lay their true happiness. Caroline Bird elaborates on this aspect-

A small girl learns by the time she is two or three that she is a girl. The nursery books that mother reads her tell what girls are like and what they do. Girls are mommies. Girls are nurses.¹⁰

Nancy Chodorow rejected the idea that women are destined to be mothers by ‘nature’ or they ‘nurture’ the desire to be mothers. Femininity according to her is not a way of being that a girl deliberately decides to assume; rather it is a gradual process that seizes the psyche of a girl before she is self consciously aware of herself as a girl. She is convinced that oppression of women originates in the female monopoly on mothering and self development. The remedy for this, according to Sherry Ortner is the system of dual parenting where both men and women engage in child rearing.

Though Psychoanalytic feminism does not provide an answer to the vice of women’s suppression it insists that a woman has to do more than fight for her rights as a citizen; she has to probe into the depths of her psyche to exorcise the original primal father and create the space to be what she is capable of being. According to psychoanalytic feminists one way to achieve equality between the sexes is by avoiding the gender specific structuring of society by having male-female coeducation.

V) Socialist Feminism: This theory brings together the best of Marxist, Radical and to some extent Psychoanalytic feminisms. It may be said to be an extension of
Marxist feminists’ dissatisfaction with Marxism that regards women’s oppression as inferior to workers’ oppression. While Marxist feminism does state that capitalism has assigned women to the home and men outside, it does not explicate why it is so and moreover gives no clue as to who would fill which places under patriarchy. In contrast Radical feminism does explicate that men would always be in places that have power while women would be given the least prestigious jobs, and it gives a material base for women’s oppression. However it does not believe in reform but in eradication of the system that espouses male power as supreme and in its universal condemnation of patriarchy it has earned many critics.

While Psychoanalytic feminism gives a full analysis why men fill the slots in the public world and women the private, they attribute this slotting to men’s and women’s gender identities, emphasizing psychic structures for women’s oppression. Socialist feminism follows the Dual System theory which maintains that patriarchy and capitalism are distinct forms of social relation and distinct sets of interest which when they intersect oppress women. Some Socialist feminists follow the Unified System theory that analyses capitalism and patriarchy together through the use of one concept wherein capitalism is no more separate from patriarchy than the mind is from the body.

Socialist feminism focuses on both the public and private spheres of a woman’s life and argues that women’s liberation can only be achieved by working to end both the economic and cultural sources of women’s suppression. It believes that there is a direct link between class structure and the oppression of women. In her book Woman’s Estate, Juliet Mitchell emphasizes that the oppression of women is rooted in the fact that we live in a class society and that oppression would end by putting an end to the divisions of class and gender. Alison Jaggar in her book Feminist Politics and
Human Nature identified alienation as a concept that separated a woman from all the processes and people that she needs to achieve wholeness as a person. For her Socialist Feminism was characterized by woman’s oppression in terms of a revised version of the Marxist theory of alienation. According to her ‘alienation’ would provide a theoretical framework to accommodate all major feminist theories. This theory argues for a change in women’s status and function in private as well as public spheres for her complete liberation. Socialist feminists reject the idea that biology predetermines one’s gender. In contrast to Radical feminists who are anti men and Liberal feminists who focus on the individual woman, Socialist feminists believe that women must work together with men in all spheres instead of ostracizing them. As against other schools of thought that focus on the individual, socialist feminism focuses on the broader context of social relations in the community.

VI) Existential Feminism: The Existentialist theory developed by Jean Paul Sartre and other philosophers like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche believed that the human individual was the source of philosophical thinking and the very fact that he existed preceded the essence of his life. In other words they believed that man was defined according to his actions and not according to what he was supposed to be or do.

The French feminist Simone de Beauvoir who was a companion of Sartre adopted the ontological and ethical claims of Existentialism and elaborated on the concept of Existential feminism. In her book The Second Sex, she wonders how biologists, psychoanalysts and Marxist feminists talk about woman’s oppressive conditions and give different reasons and remedies for it; however none specifies why woman and not man is the Other. “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”
was her theory. She reiterated that femininity was a state of being other to oneself, where men have defined themselves as the ‘Self’ and women as the ‘Other’.

According to her, the oppression of woman is due to her otherness. The most important obstacle to a woman’s freedom was not her biology, or the political and legal constraints placed upon her, or even her economic situation; rather it was the whole process by which femininity is manufactured in society. If a woman is to be truly liberated she must determine the meaning of her existence all by herself and transcend the limiting labels and roles assigned by men.  

According to her the large network of religion, myth, literature and culture socially and culturally produces femininity and consequently the subordination of women. She specified that social roles were the primary mechanisms that the ‘Self’ uses to control the ‘Other’. The roles of wife and mother stunt women’s self development and bid for freedom, as also the roles of the professional and career woman wherein the woman is expected to add to her professional duties, her feminine duties viz. a charming appearance that would please man. This conflict between the professional and the feminine makes her diffident and insecure. It is not easy for women to escape the limits and roles that men and society have imposed on her however De Beauvoir strongly believed that women’s bodies should not prescribe a definite mode of existence for her. Within the limits that constrain any human being, women can shape their destiny and can employ three strategies to move from the path of ‘immanence’ to ‘transcendence’.

1) Women must work irrespective of the nature of work even if it is oppressive or monotonous as this would open new possibilities for them. She would feel like
an active member charting her destiny. One of the keys to women’s liberation was her economic self sufficiency.

2) Women can become intellectuals, opening up possibilities of change for other women also. She encouraged women to study writers like Emily Bronte, Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield.

3) Women can work towards a socialist transformation of society and end the conflicts between ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ and ‘Subject’ and ‘Object’ in general and between men and women in particular.

In this shift to transcendence, Beauvoir was not asking woman to negate herself but rather shed off the burdens that hampered her progress towards authentic selfhood. However she cautioned that this was easier said than done as a woman’s efforts to be what she wanted, would always be limited by the kind of existence given to her; in short the social environment needed to be cleared for a woman to lead an existence as per her desire.

**VII) Eco Feminism:** A comparatively modern theory, eco feminism according to Val Plumwood in her book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* combines the two most important political and social movements of the twentieth century viz. feminism and environmentalism. The term was coined by Françoise d’Eaubonne in her book *Le Feminism ou La Morte* wherein she called upon women to lead an ecological revolution to ensure the survival of the planet. For her eco feminism was an attempt to synthesise two separated struggles, feminism and ecology.

The reasoning is simple. Practically every one knows that the two most immediate threats of death today are over population and the destruction of the natural resources; fewer are aware of the entire responsibility of male system… in creating these two perilous situations…each one is the logical outcome of one of
the two parallel discoveries which gave power to men
fifty centuries ago: reproduction and their capacity of
sowing the earth as they do women.\textsuperscript{12}

Eco feminism tries to integrate humanity with non human nature with
emphasis on redefining women's historical role in child bearing and child rearing. Most eco feminists believe that the gender behaviours of women and men are biologically determined and women are closer to nature because of their reproductive capability. However, in doing so ecofeminism reiterates that woman's place is in nature and involuntarily gives a boost to patriarchs who take undue advantage of this association.

Some Eco feminists though, believe that important connections exist between domination of women and domination of nature and that there is a link between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature. Socialist ecofeminists rate women and nature on the same scale because both are exploited by men. Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies in their book \textit{Eco-Feminism} emphasise men's desire to conquer both women and nature to have complete power and insist how this desire destroys both women and the earth.

Socialist ecofeminists also believe that the capitalist relations of production reveal the domination of nature by men. The (ab) use of nature "inherent in the market economy's use of it as a means of resources "shows man's domination over nature.\textsuperscript{13} Carolyn Merchant in her article ‘Eco-Feminism and Feminist Theory’ pointed out that for socialist eco feminists, environmental problems were rooted in the rise of capital patriarchy and the ideology that the earth and nature can be exploited for human progress through technology. They believe that the idea of dominating nature stems from the domination of human by human.
Uma Devi, an Indian eco feminist in her book *Women, Work, Development and Ecology* elaborated on the relationship between eco feminism and ecologically sustainable development saying that ‘there is a distinct relationship between women and the environment and women have certain responsibilities that make them dependent on nature and they also have an extensive knowledge of these natural resources.’

Ivy Singh believes that this works to women’s disadvantage. As women are considered to be both users and dependents of nature sharing a special relationship with nature, they are the greatest victims of environmental degradation; however she believes that women also have the knowledge and experience to resist the technocratic destruction of nature and replace it by a more human approach.

Eco Feminism struggles against any form of ill treatment and works for the well being of both women and nature. This theory not only addresses the issues of women and nature but also considers the socio-economic-cultural and political discriminations as root causes of the problems faced by women and nature. In the ideal society of Ecofeminists human beings would not dominate over nature, nor men over women.

Only ending all systems of domination makes possible an ecological society, in which no states or capitalist economies attempt to subjugate nature.

The seven feminist theories discussed above do not cover the entire gamut of feminist theories; however I have selected them on the basis of their contribution to the development of feminist critical thought in general and their significance to the plays selected in this dissertation in particular. A more comprehensive discussion of the theories vis-à-vis the plays would be done in the individual chapters on each play.
At this point I have also realized the subtle and significant part that feminism has played in literature and in the following write up have tried to explore the interconnectedness between feminist critical theory and literature.

**Feminist Criticism and Literature**

On the one hand, feminists in the women’s movement were fighting for political and social changes that would liberate women from patriarchal oppression on the basis of the above theories, while on the other hand feminist critics were attempting to extend these changes into the domain of literature and culture. Like feminist theories, feminist critical theories too oppose patriarchy and male centered and male dominated critical theories. The wheel now seems to have come full circle. Similar to their earliest counterparts who interpreted the Bible to the woman’s advantage, these feminist critics interpreted literature written by both men and women according to the feminist critical theories they believed in. Feminist literary criticism and its responses to the ways women are depicted in literature has been a major fieldwork in the modern age. It takes a fresh view of women’s writing and women’s reading in which the conventional suppression of women is questioned.

Elaine Showalter, a prominent and very vocal espousal of the cause of feminist criticism in the twentieth century gave two theories of feminist literary criticism as mentioned below, in her essay *Towards A Feminist Poetics*.

I. The traditional “Woman as Reader” or “Feminist Critique” wherein the woman is a consumer of male produced literature.

The hypothesis of a female reader changes our apprehension of a given text, awakening us to the significance of its sexual codes. Its subjects include the images and stereotypes of woman in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in
criticism, and the fissures in male constructed literary history.\textsuperscript{16}

In this critique there is a feminist reading of texts written by male authors. According to Showalter, this is a mode of interpretation that any complex text would accommodate and permit. J. Ellen Gainor maintains that many feminist critics no longer feel it appropriate to study works by male authors. Nevertheless the writings of male authors cannot be ignored, as “a male writer is a fact of woman’s history”.\textsuperscript{17}

II. The “Woman as Writer” or “Gynocritics Critique” wherein the woman is the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women.

Gynocritics is more self contained and experimental, with connections to other modes of new feminist research….Its subjects include the psychodynamics of female creativity, linguistics and the problem of a female language, the trajectory of the individual or collective female literary career and literary history.\textsuperscript{18}

This critique challenges the traditionally patriarchal literary canon by revisiting and reexamining texts by women and thus tracing a female tradition. Its special emphasis is on ways in which women writers create ‘a world of their own.’

My focus in the ensuing chapters will be on Showalter’s first theory as I explore the six plays from the “woman as reader” perspective. Such a feminist reading, according to Adrienne Rich can be a liberating intellectual experience opening up new vistas to women’s history.

…it would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name- and therefore live-afresh.\textsuperscript{19}
Though feminist criticism was not as prominent at the time when these plays were written, the aim here is to discuss the behaviour of the women protagonists reeling under patriarchy vis-à-vis some feminist critical theories that have evolved over the years. Helen Keyssar gives a very clarifying perspective on the importance of a strong female protagonist in the drama, emphasizing the variable and transformative role that a feminist heroine plays.

Drama has traditionally urged us to know ourselves better, to search our histories and to reveal to ourselves and others who we really are. In feminist drama impetus is not towards self-recognition and revelation of a true self but towards recognition of others and a concomitant transformation of the self and the world. ²⁰

The heroines in the selected plays here undergo similar transformations. They are not perfect feminists from the beginning but evolve as determined, steely women when faced with crushing misogynist surroundings. Though not outright path breakers, each of our heroines portrays a combination of the so-called traditional woman and the rebel who is forced by circumstances to change her approach to life. Right from Agnes Ebbsmith through Mrs. Warren to Rachel Arbuthnot and Juno, Maurya and Abbie, each woman displays an element of her feminist nature in the course of the play. At that particular juncture she reiterates her individuality and manages to change her life and those of the people round her.
NOTES


