Chapter-ii

Feminism And the Feministic Movement
The term feminism has been derived from the Latin word 'femina' which means women. It was used with regard to the issue of equality and the movement of 'Woman’s Rights'. Its usage was first discussed by an American – Alice Rossi, in a book review published in *The Athenaeum* on 27 April, 1895 and, ever since its discovery, it has been widely used. Feminism essentially fosters the idea of an egalitarian society where men and women are considered equal, and the idea of male dominance is discarded. In a seminar organized by Indian Association for Canadian Studies (IACS), feminism was supposed to include every problem concerning women.

"After much debate it was concluded that feminism is a
polycentric phenomenon embracing various aspects of women's issues.” (Mohan, Editor, IACS Newsletter, Nov 1992).

Feminism which basically means the assertion of female identity arises when a woman refuses to be a doormat or a prostitute, and in fact it did arise as a protest against patriarchy, sexual colonialism, sexism, consistent subject-deprivation of women, male hypocrisy, marginalization, denial of identity, considering woman as a property, marital rape, denial of sexual rights and double code of conduct etc. John Stuart Mill in his book *Political Economy* “deplored existing economic irregularities for women.” (Curti, 1964 621)

These factors have at length been analyzed with reference to life and letters of feminist creative literature, and to eight critical feminist texts – Mary
Wollstonecraft’s, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, J S Mill’s *On the Subjection of Women*, Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, Simon de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch*, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* and Helene’s *The Laugh of the Medusa*. Feminism is both a protest and politics, and emancipatory in orientation and focus. “The right to vote became the basic demand of feminist movements because the election was considered to be the fundamental act of political life.” (*The Encyclopedia Americana* 103)

Although feminism in literature began in early 1960’s, there were many writers who had been preparing for it for long. In English fiction, the first few names which come to mind in this respect are Bronte Sisters who gave
much more power to the women characters than was known earlier.

“This has always been man’s world”, laments Simon de Beavour. She goes on speaking about the suppressive character of this world where man is always the subject and woman the object. In this context she goes on explaining the social conditioning going on for centuries because of which she finally concludes that one is not born a woman, but becomes one. Another feminist critic also speaks on the practice to allot woman traditional roles so that, as C P Gilman points out, woman’s world is confined to four C’s -- cooking, children, church and clothes. As soon as a girl child is born, she is subjected to a series of moral lessons to become a dutiful daughter, a devoted wife, and finally a sacrificing mother. This pattern of life is very much reflected even in the
literature which has been a true mirror of man's idea of woman and not vice-versa. So history has become in reality 'his history'. Because of the Biblical fall of Adam and on account of Eve's greed to taste the forbidden fruit, woman was supposed to be, in western mind, as 'woe-man'.

When the first stage of feminism began during the 50's - 60's, women writers were basically opposed and objected to the male mind-set and male centered principles. The feminist moves towards gynocentric criticism that a woman has as much right as a man to lead and express her life. It was totally against the traditional writing style in which a male character was basically a central figure with all his heroic feats and ideals. A woman character did appear in the novel but basically in a subordinate role as the male figure had a
romantic attachment with her. Hardly there was any central role played by a woman figure. But this tradition and biased approach towards women in the novels and other writings was resented by the feminists. Moreover, they also questioned the very validity of truly reflecting a woman’s experience by male writers.

Though we have the captions of the novels on heroines as – ‘Pamela’ by Samuel Richardson and ‘Ctissa Harlowe’ by Henry Fielding, they were basically found following the male concept of virtue and possessed none of their own. But the ice was broken by the well known novelist Jane Austen who presented some women characters in her novels such as Elizabeth in Pride and Prejudice and Emma in the novel of the same name. She is perhaps the first writer who tried to do some justice in presenting the female point of view. “Yet there are two
factors that hindered her true presentation. She was not bold enough to free herself from social conditioning. That’s why, her heroine also thinks mostly in terms of marriage and money. Secondly, Austen was pure artist, much more concerned about the formal pattern of novel than anything else.” (Kaushik 68)

But as the women writers began to make their niche, they presented women characters with their heroic feats. Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* is a classic example of how an orphan girl could gradually rise to curvethe hero’s conviction to all her own, tame a Byronic hero Mr. Rochester, and put him finally at her mercy. Rochester is a commanding, imperious person of great ferocity, who thinks and acts quite independently. We witness the picture of an independent woman in Jane Eyre when the same hero, after the tragic incident of
burning, becomes blind and crippled. It is at this juncture that Jane Eyre once again appears in her life and declares that she happens to be an independent woman after the illness of the hero.

Emergence of free woman can further be seen in the characters of Catharine of Wuthering Heights, Shirley Keeldar in *Shirley* and Lucy Snowe of *Villette*. Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country* and Lily Bart of *The House of Mirth* can also be placed in this category. They challenged the male dominated society and lived their life according to their thinking and desire.

Theodore Dreiser went far ahead in depicting the women characters and gave an open challenge to the then male dominated American society. Roberta, Jennie and Sister Carrie – the three prominent characters in three of his best novels – *An American tragedy, Jennie*
Gerhardt and Sister Carrie can be considered as the forefront lady characters of the American novel. They very successfully break the strands of the traditional and customary rules and set examples for others. Not only this, they also forced people to come out of the conservative framework of mind.

But all these changes could not be brought about overnight. We have their roots in various feminist movements which took place in various parts of the world. America was not left far behind in this regard. At the time of American Revolution, the American women, just as their European sisters, were clearly an oppressed group. They were generally uneducated and usually had no financial resources of their own. If they earned an income, they rarely had any control over it. Married women were legally dominated by their husbands and
were completely dependent upon them. Middle and upper class women, of course, enjoyed material comfort, but were confined and restricted at every turn by rigid social codes and double standards. Most important of all, women had no political rights, could not run for office, and were not allowed to vote.

Many women accepted their unequal status without question, but there were also others who took an active interest in political life, and who became increasingly dissatisfied with their continued exclusion. The new 'enlightened' ideas of liberty, equality and democracy that were being discussed by men found a strong echo among intelligent women, and when the American colonies prepared for their secession from the English crown, female hopes for sexual equality naturally ran high. Thus, one can assume that Abigel Adams spoke
not just for herself when in the spring of 1776, she wrote to her husband John Adams (who later was to become the second President of the United States) that she longed to hear that he had declared an independency. She desired he would remember the ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than his ancestors. She further requested her husband not to put such unlimited power into the hands of Husbands as all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, they would be determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold themselves bound by any laws in which they had no voice, or Representation. However, John Adams promptly rejected her plea with some insincere arguments.

It is striking to note that when the United States of America was founded and the Constitution was adopted,
women and slaves were given their political rights. European women who admired and came to study the new country (USA) on visits, soon felt their enthusiasm dampened when they encountered the old sexual discrimination and the reality of slavery. For example, the Scottish writer Frances Wright, who published her *Views of Society and Manners in America* in 1820, and who eventually settled in the United States, decided to fight actively for the freedom of slaves, the emancipation of women, and the rights of the urban poor. In the tradition of enlightenment, she also opposed the beginning of the religious revival in America as reactionary and inimical to human progress. Her social experiments and her personal flamboyance made her many enemies, but many of her criticisms were later vindicated. The English writer Harriet Martineau in her *Society in America* (1837) offered a perceptive
description of life in the New World, but at times during her visit, she had to fear for her own life because she supported the abolition of slavery. Sexual inequality and economic injustice were also attacked by the American writer Margret Fuller whose study *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) was one of the most admired books of the time.

In the 1920's and 30's various religious and moral reforms had attacked a growing number of American women. Education, peace, temperance (i.e., the banning of Alcohol) and abolition (i.e., the freeing of the slaves) were the first social concerns to which female American Christians could properly devote themselves. Over the following decades, this general reform movement flourished and eventually also came to include a new struggle for women's suffrage. Temperance was, of
course, of deep personal interest to women, since alcoholic husbands could spend the entire family income on drinks, and their wives had no legal means to do anything about it. Because of their dependent status, they and their children were left unprotected. The interest in abolition, on the other hand, was entirely altruistic. There were a few great women in the abolitionist movement, such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, but its most prominent representatives belonged to the white middle class.

In 1838, Angelina Grimka became the first woman to address an American legislative body when she gave an abolitionist speech before the Massachusetts legislature and took the opportunity to raise women’s claim to full citizenship. Two other important abolitionists who turned to feminism were Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady
Stanton. They were appalled by some episodes of sexual discrimination within the abolitionist movement and, in 1848, therefore organized history’s first “Women’s Rights Convention” in Seneca Falls, New York. This convention passed a ‘Declaration of Sentiments’ which echoed the ‘American Declaration of Independence proclaiming: “We hold these truths to be self evident; that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The document then went on to quote the right to change the form of government and stated: “The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man towards woman, having indirect object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her.” (American Charter of Women’s Independence, New York 37)
The Seneca Falls convention also adopted a set of resolutions, demanding legal and educational reforms and the end of the sexual double standards. Finally, it resolved that it would be the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise.

These demands were quickly attacked and ridiculed by Clergymen and male journalists all over the country. Only a few men had foresight enough to recognize the importance of the women's cause and to support it among them the great black abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who applauded the feminists in his newspaper and appeared as a guest speaker before subsequent women's rights conventions. The women themselves were undaunted by the hostility they encountered and battled on. Elizabeth Cady Stanton found a close friend
and ally in Susan B. Anthony, the Napoleon of the women's movement, whose tireless work and practical skill won her national recognition and the respect of her adversaries. The beliefs and experiences of these two courageous women were recorded for posterity in the first three volumes of the massive *History of Women Suffrage* (1881-86) which they edited together.

The American Civil War (1861-65) brought the women's movement to a temporary halt, but when the abolitionist's goal was finally achieved and the slaves were freed, women seized the opportunity to raise their demands once more. Indeed, they had the reason to hope that, together with black men, they would now be granted the vote. However, this hope was soon disappointed. Over and over again, women were told to wait and not to jeopardize the granting of black voting
rights by pressing their own demands at the same time. This well-meaning, but shortsighted argument succeeded in splitting the women's movement and reduced its effectiveness for many years. Even worse, women experienced the most serious setback when, in the fourteenth Amendment (1868), the Constitution for the first time explicitly defined only men as voters.

Nevertheless, in several other respects, progress was being made. Higher education became accessible to women. In 1830's, women's colleges had been founded. Thus, for example, Elizabeth Blackwell became the first woman to earn a medical degree in the United States. She and her sisters Emily, who also became a Physician, wrote a book about *Medicine as a Profession for Women* (1860) and inspired many girls to enter the field of medicine and other formerly only 'male' field of
study. Feminists also began to concern themselves with dress of reform, the fight against prostitution, better working conditions and higher wages, child labour, unionization, and sexual freedom. Some of these issues proved even more explosive than women's suffrage, and many women remained rather cautious and conservative in discussing them. However, some radical feminists were inhibited. Thus, as early as 1871, Victoria Woodhull spoke of 'inalienable, constitutional, and natural right' to free love, emotionally rejecting the still prevailing double standards. Emma Goldman wrote a penetrating analysis of female oppression in her *Women and Economics* (1898). This widely-read book demanded economic equality for women as the key to political freedom and criticized the existing family structure.
One thing was obvious to everyone: In the course of the century, the United States had undergone a profound transformation. From an agrarian nation of independent settlers, it had changed into a largely urban and industrial society with millions of new poor immigrants and vast social problems. The subjection and disenfranchisement of women only added to these problems because it made their solution more difficult. Other nations which experienced similar pressures finally took corrective actions. New Zealand gave women in the right to vote in 1813, Finland in 1906. The First World War produced social upheavals in Europe and secured the vote for women in the Netherlands and the Soviet Union (1917) and, to a limited extent in Great Britain (1918). Germany followed suit in 1919. Under the circumstances, the lack of suffrage in the United States became an embarrassment. Therefore, in 1920,
the country finally adopted the ‘Nineteenth Amendment’ to the constitution granting women the right to vote, a struggle of over seventy years had finally been succeeded.

Still, a feminist well knew, this victory was hardly enough, since sexual discrimination continued in many other subtle and not so subtle ways. Unequal pay for equal work, exclusion from influential positions, and innumerable specific legal restrictions denied women equal opportunities in American life. The economic exploitation of women was far from ever. The feminist movement therefore supported welfare legislation for maternity and infant care, birth control, stricter labour laws, and government regulation of business. This led to a vicious ‘red smear’ attack by the established powers which denounced feminists as ‘Bolshevik dupes’ and
'communist conspirators' and accused them of 'undermining the family'. Primitive and transparent as they were, these tactics proved nevertheless to be very successful. Many respectable middle-class women were frightened away from the movement and dissuaded from defending their interests.

In 1923, the first 'Equal Rights amendment' was introduced in Congress standing: Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction. However, this proposed Amendment created trouble even within the feminist movement, because it seemed to eliminate some protective labour legislation advantageous to women. A long and heated debate ensued in political conventions, committees, newspapers, journals, and popular magazines. In the long run, nothing came of it but
disunity among women and a decline in their political influence.

Amidst these political struggles of women for their place in the mainstream society, some very prominent writers emerged with their world class writings and gave a new direction to feministic ideology. The writers like Edith Wharton, Sherwood Anderson, Henry James, Honore De Balzac, Gustav Flaubert, Charles Dickens, W M Thackeray, D H Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and Anthony Trollop were the chief figures of American and British Realistic Movement. But when Dreiser published his masterpiece, *An American Tragedy* (1925), he not only established himself among the champion of 'Realism', but also tried to break the strands of restrictions sanctioned against women and became a follower of feminism.
This feminism was further supported by writers like Willa Cather who sought "solace against the compatible present in the rituals, beliefs, and countersense of the past." (Conn, 323) Many of her contemporaries, including the reform-minded women and men she worked with, sought rather to remake society along more human lines. Large number of women enlisted for the cause of sexual equality in marriage and workplace or worked to secure right to vote in federal elections. Margaret Sanger risked abuse and arrest by promoting birth control, especially among poor women, in lectures and in a magazine called *Women Rebel*. Jane Addams founded 'Hull House' as a refuse for Chicago's malnourished mothers and eventually expanded its interests to encompass the whole range of social and political reform that stirred America in the early twentieth century. The 'Women's Trade Union League'
was founded in 1903 to secure for women the organizing mechanism that the men of the American Federation of Labour (AFL) refused to share. Leaders like Rose Schneidermann, who led New York’s hat and cap makers in a dangerous strike, emerged from the ranks of the women workers.

In several books, including *Virginia* (1913), *The Life of Gabriella* (1916), and *Barren Ground* (1925), Allen Glasgow attended to the status of women in changing southern part of America. In *Barren Ground*, one of her best novels, the career of the central character could be said to recapitulate the South Literary development in the early twentieth century. Dorinda Oakley is the daughter of the defeated parents who scratch a hard living out of the meager soil of their small Virginia farm, and she longs for marriage as escape and fulfillment.
Instead, the man she loves seduces and jilts her. These initial premises seem conventionally romantic. As the novel progresses, however, it moves steadily away from such melodrama toward a more matured realism. Dorinda neither pays for her sexual transgression with death, nor does she collapse into matrimonial contentment with some forgiving man at the end of her story, nor does she marginally transform the lesser characters around her. She is not interested in anyone’s forgiveness or sympathy. Rather, she chooses work over passion and stands thirty years quietly mastering the barren ground of the book’s title. She becomes successful and independent. “The structure of the novel is the straightforward, in many ways un-dramatic, but the book is potent in its celebration of female integrity and endurance.” (Conn, 419) Out of a prose that moves with the methodical pace of repetitive but productive
working days, Glasgow created in Dorinda Oakley one of the studier woman characters of the twentieth century fiction.

The ‘second wave’ of feminism emerged after the Second World War in a number of countries. A commission on the Status of Women was appointed by the United Nations in 1947. After two years it issued a Declaration of Human Rights which declared that men and women enjoyed equal rights concerning marriage, during marriage and even after its dissolution. It also entitled them to special care during pregnancy.

It was not until the 1960’s that feminism experienced another upsurge. In 1953, Simon de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex had appeared in English translation, an influential book that analyzed the history and implications of female subjection in western culture.

"Beavois was one of the women who signed a 1971
manifesto published in *Nouvel Observateur*, drawn up by an MLF group, who were campaigning to legalize abortion, 343 women signed it...” (Walters 2010 99) In 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, openly criticizing the prevailing stereotypical role of the American housewife and mother. When the National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded in 1966, it soon became the largest and best known of the various new women’s organizations. NOW almost immediately took up the fight for an Equal Rights Amendment and demanded several other drastic reforms, such as the right to abortion. In the meantime, these demands found much wider support than previously, because many middle-class women and writers had become radicalized through the renewed black civil rights struggle, voter registration drives in the South, and the peace movement against the American war in the Southeast Asia. Sexual and reproductive liberation could be discussed more
openly, as the whole country had become more sensitive to issues of fairness and individual freedom. No matter how difficult and lengthy the struggle for ratification of the women's liberty may turn out to be and no matter how it may fail, but the struggle is going to be a decisive in time to come.

Thus, we can say that feminism and feminist movement in American perspective have played a pivotal role in finding the place in today's American society. Amid these movements and constant struggle, we must not forget the role of the feministic writers who fought this battle at their level. They faced the masters of the destiny to be positive on the issue of feminism and to take this matter seriously. No doubt, in view of the changes that we witness in the American society in terms of women's position, we can't underestimate the role of feministic writers.

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