Chapter — 1

Feminism: Significance of Body in Feminist Discourse

“To write from the body is to recreate the world”

(Jones, “Writing the Body” 361).

The dominantly prevalent patriarchal culture organized around sexual difference and based on the primacy of the male at the cost of the female, equates women with body— “whether it is a body which fulfils the male sexual urge, or a body which slogs until it drops down with fatigue” (Jain, Across Cultures 86). By defining women in terms of their physical capacity for reproduction and by merging their biological functions into imposed socio-cultural characteristics (what Toril Moi refers to as merging of femaleness and femininity in her essay “Feminist Literary Criticism”) patriarchy has manipulated to establish women’s biological as well as mental inferiority in relation to men. Moira Gatens comments, “Man is the model and it is his body which is taken for the human body; his reason which is taken for reasons; his morality which is formalized into a system of ethics” (Imaginary Bodies 24). Margrit Shildrick also says, “though there is no fixed referent, the male body (in its own various constructions) is posited as the natural standard against which the female body is measured and valued— as inferior, as different, as insubstantial, as absent” (Leaky Bodies 44). By doing so patriarchy has further drawn a distinction between the private and the public sphere, the family and the state, and the domestic and the non-domestic. To colonize women’s bodies further, patriarchy has propagated that “he, not she is the worker. His work is real work; her work is vicarious leisure” (Greer, The Whole Woman 36). Hence, whereas embodiment as a male is a matter of celebration, embodiment as a female is a matter of disadvantage in many ways. Summing up the whole situation, Bowden and Mummery observe:

Possessing a woman’s body has meant, for instance, not possessing the right or capacity to control everything that happens to or is expected of that body. Women’s bodies are, after all, like their lives, affected on all sides by various forms of explicit and implicit social, political, legal, symbolic and discursive
control. Women cannot rely, for example, on having the right to decide whether or not to start, continue or terminate a pregnancy, or even whether or not to have sex. They also cannot easily prevent being valued and / or objectified on the basis of their physical appearance and how that appearance matches up with prevailing – and perhaps even impossible– cultural norms and ideas, including those based on colour and race. (Understanding Feminism 45)

To strengthen and perpetuate its control of women and their bodies and maintain its supremacy in society, patriarchy has trapped women in a cluster of inextricably linked images—womanhood, eternal femininity, wifehood, motherhood. These images are interlinked because they all aim at controlling and subjugating female bodies by confining them to domestic domain. Patriarchy has also manipulated to keep women rooted in body through various discursive practices— myths, codes of conduct and morality, religious rituals and taboos, and social institutions like marriage and family. No doubt, these practices tend to differ depending on culture, time and space, yet the sexist bias against women is foundational to almost all societies. Alice Munro, a Canadian writer, through the narrator’s voice in her story ‘Boys and Girls” says:

The word girl had formerly seemed to me innocent and unburdened, like the world child; now it appeared that it was no such thing. A girl was not, as I had supposed, simply what I was; it was what I had to become. It was a definition, always touched with emphasis, with reproach and disappointment. Also it was a joke on me. (119)

This biological constructionism or weaving of, what Rosi Braidotti calls, “the social imaginary” (Nomadic Subjects 14) around female bodies, or Moira Gatens calls “imaginary bodies” has got so much deep into our social and psychological structures that it has come to be perceived natural and universal even by women themselves. Thus, this socio-cultural construction of women makes feminism feel concerned with the “the historical, social and political meanings of sexual difference in the human body, and the spectrum of experiences, those meanings produce” (Kevin, Feminism and the Body 1).

Thus, in the context of feminism ‘body’ refers not only to the female sexed beings but also to their culturally constructed roles and socially prescribed patterns of
behavior and morality. It is because there is nothing as “universal, decontextualized body” (DeMello 5). This way ‘body’ is what society makes of female bodies by imposing on them various inextricably linked images so that they remain passive and docile to serve the cause of patriarchy. Hence it is the “discursive construction” of women or “the form of materialization of the body rather than the material itself, which is the concern of feminism that must ask always what purpose and whose interest do particular constructions serve” (Shildrick, “Openings on the Body” 7). It is this constructed nature of body/woman which has stimulated feminism, because the very constructed nature of ‘woman’ implies that the perception about women can be transformed by altering and re-casting the images imposed upon female bodies. That is why, the contemporary feminism not only challenges these images, practices, rules and roles thrust on women; but also tries to destabilize these by bringing body/woman from, what bell hooks calls, margin to center or Ann Rosalind Jones calls writing the body.

This awareness of the significance of female body as a site for freeing women from male-centered thinking and cultural structures can be called to have its starting point in Simone de Beauvoir’s oft-quoted claim—“one is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (The Second Sex 249). However, it became a central issue in contemporary feminism mainly due to the postmodernist ‘body’ turn and French women scholars like Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray—“write yourself, your body must be heard” (Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa” 338). Thus, feminism, basically a movement to “recreate” the world, intends to do so by transforming the perception of society towards women and of women towards themselves too. It tries to find out what Rosi Braidotti calls “figurations of alternative feminist subjectivity” (Nomadic Subjects 11). It also desires to alter mainstream perception of women as the objects of history and culture by focusing on their role as makers of history and culture by motivating women to become writers:

There is no eraser
That can rub off the marks
Of male scribbling on my forehead-
They are the age-old edicts
You alone can smash
Let us rewrite
Our own history

(Shilalolitha qtd. in Jain, Indigenous Roots 271)
With this objective of transformation, feminism has come to rely much on literary studies which works on “the premise that women read and on the conclusion…. that women’s reading is of consequence intellectually, politically and poetically” (Rooney 4). It is because it is perceived that the power of literary texts go beyond the text. These texts have the potential not only to portray the prevalent images and roles surrounding female body, but also to rupture the dominant discourse by interrogating those images which, says Jasbir Jain, confer “a certain degree of passivity on the subject which is cast in an image, the active role being bestowed upon the image-caster” (11). That is why she continues re-casting of the image of body/women gains significance in feminist writing by “making, moulding, engraving, creating—writing the body, writing the ‘women’. It carries within it both power and presence” (Across Cultures 52). This is what Rajeshwari Rajan Sunder calls “advocacy of the progressive” and “attack on the regressive” (“The Scene of Theory in India” 319).

It is this transformational objective, which makes feminism a political agenda and has come to be considered the essence of feminism, which has came to encompass feminist activism, theory and literary studies. Diana Fuss explains, “Politics is precisely the self-evident category in feminist discourse—that which is most irreducible and most indispensable… both the most transparent and the most elusive of terms” (111). Kate Millet also stresses on feminism as a political action which she describes in her book Sexual Politics (on its cover) as “breaking the tyranny of sexual roles”. Toril Moi, explains:

To be feminist is to take up a political position. It requires the capacity to posit certain goals and to define one’s enemies, and the will and ability to attack them. Feminism, one might say, requires us not simply to describe the status quo, but to define it as unjust and oppressive as well. It also requires a vision of an alternative, a utopian perspective which inspires and informs the struggle against current oppression. (Simone De Beauvoir 185)

To achieve their feminist goals, feminists have not only identified their enemy (various oppressive images and constraints imposed on women), but have also been raising their voice against these from time to time and from land to land. This protest has been in the
form of dialogues, oral and written discourse, various movements (social, political, racial and national) and protest marches. For example, in the West, feminism has its roots in religion when women like Hildegard of Bingen in 12th century, Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe in 15th century dared to defy scriptural prohibitions (Walters 6-16). In our own country, the questioning of patriarchal structures and gender inequality finds echo in the devotional songs of Mutta in 6th century, Lal Ded in 14th Century and Mira Bai in 16th century (Tharu & Lalita). These few examples might testify that feminist articulations have a long though checkered tradition spread over different lands and times.

However, feminism, as we understand it to-day, as a movement of securing woman’s identity as a human and as intellectually and socially man’s equal, has its beginning in the West and owes much to Mary Woolstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792), J. S. Mill’s The Subjection of Women (1869), Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own (1929) and Simone De Beauvoir’s The Second Sex (1949). These works anticipated almost all major issues related with women’s position—recognition and analysis of their subjugated status, need for their education, legal representation and rights to vote, to property and admission to professions.

These women and other European women, who articulated against patriarchy at that time were mainly from high class and well connected conventional families whose women spent their time in acquiring grace, skills and accomplishments to woo suitors to provide them a luxurious life after marriage. As wives they were expected to be passively obedient to their husbands, to take care of domestic arrangements and to abide by the ‘womanly’ virtues of modesty, piety, chastity and charity. Laws of marriage, property, divorce and custody of infants also favoured men. Many of these women felt suffocated or, what Florence Nightingale called, “martyr to genteel and leisured femininity” (qtd. in Walters 49). Such like-minded women gradually forged feminist movements all over Europe by organizing campaigns like the Ladies of Langham Palace Campaign, agitation against the Contagious Disease Act and the Suffragette Movement. Many women protesters like Emily Davison even sacrificed their life for the cause. Consequently, the English women achieved legal and civil equality and right to education and entry into professions. Since these women had little knowledge about the
position of the lower class women in their own land and of women in other lands, the mainstream feminism remained equated with white, affluent, middle-class women’s liberation movement till the middle of the 20th century.

However, this scenario changed with the advent of cultural and postcolonial studies and the articulations of black women scholars like Mary Helen Washington, Barbara Christian and bell hooks. It began to be emphasized that difference of class, caste, culture, ethnicity, religion and legacy of colonialism add different dimensions to gender difference and oppression, making these more problematic for the women concerned. Based on their own lived experiences, these scholars stressed that the plight of black women was quite different from that of the white middle class women as the former had to face the double axe of sexism and racism. They also emphasized that because of different social systems, the priorities of black women were different from those of the white women. Summing up the difference in their priorities, Ann Ducille says:

Whereas white female activists were concerned with the right of married women to own property, for example, black women were concerned with the basic human right not to be literally owned as chattel. As white women lobbied to change divorce laws, black women lobbied to change the laws that prohibited slaves from marrying. While white women sought definition outside the roles of wife and mother, black women sought the freedom to live within traditional gender roles, to claim the luxury of loving their own men and mothering their own children …. (30)

This plight of black slave women finds echo as early as in 1851 in Sojourner Truth’s famous statement “And Ain’t I a Woman?” (qtd. in Ducille 37) These slave women were treated in an inhuman way, and because of their being women, their survival was linked with the physical potential of their bodies—as labour, as objects of lust satisfaction of the slave owners and also as a means to increase the labour force of slave owners. So, if as women, their femaleness and body were exploited for lust satisfaction, they were treated as “masculinized sub human creatures” to work like men on farms. What is worse, is that they were blamed for enticing the white owners into evil and
were thus also considered “the embodiment of female evil and sexual lust” (hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman* 33).

In the context of our own country, we have women’s position and feminist thinking which are different from the western or the black society because of our socio-cultural values, religious beliefs and some inherent contradictions within our belief system. In our culture, individuality and equality have never been important issues as in the West; because we consider family, community and society to be more important than the individual, not only in case of women but men as well. Further, in place of the western emphasis on opposition and confrontation as a solution of problem, we lay emphasis on compromise and tolerance. Moreover, we have, as Suma Chitnis says, “a highly positive concept of the feminine principle. Unlike Christianity, Judaism or Islam, the image of God in Hinduism is not exclusively male. The female principle complements and completes the male” (“Feminism: Indian Ethos” 16). We have divine couples such as Shiva-Shakti, Ram-Sita and a number of goddesses such as Laxmi and Saraswati. Many of our religious rituals and ceremonies can be performed by married couples only. Nevertheless, subordinated and subjugated position of common women is a fact of society in India as well. And this perception might be traced to the dual concepts of ‘Purusa’ and Prakriti’ in Indian Philosophy. Here ‘Purusa’ (the male principle) is seen as mind/awareness and the final cause, whereas ‘Prakrit’ (the female principal) is seen as the matter/physical universe, and hence subordinate. The long epic tradition (through the Mahabhrata and the Ramayana and through their variants) has also perpetuated the superiority of male over female.

This prevalence of many contradictions about women’s position in the Hindu-dominant society not only complicates the situation of women but also poses different challenges for feminism here. That is why Namita Gokhale says, “The concept of ‘Bhartiya Nari’ is a can of worms crawling with contradictions” (Interview to IANS). Thus on the one extreme, we worship women as Devi Saraswati, Durga, Shakti, Lakshmi and girl child as ‘Kanjak’, and also stress on the complementarity of the male and the female in the concept of the ‘ardhanarishwar’; on the other extreme, we have been subjecting women to social practices like sati, madi (young widows expected to observe purity and uphold traditions while serving round the clock their large in laws’
households), devdasi, witch-burning, dowry, killing of girl children and female feticide.

It should not be forgotten that it is due to their embodiment as females that women are not only subjected to these oppressive practices but also considered source of seduction and distraction away from knowledge as revealed through myths involving ‘apsaras’ like Maneka. Moreover, the image of motherhood, though intermingled with wifehood in other cultures as well, has a specific dimension in India because of the preference for sons over daughters (reflected in the blessing of ‘putravati bhav’ to the newly wedded wife and observance of fasts and rituals for male children). Further, the concept of ‘pativrata’ embedded in wifehood expects a married woman to accord unquestioning obedience and submission to her husband, her lord (‘pati parmeshwar’). Again, the interlinked ideal images of Sita-Sati-Savitri, by eulogizing the ability to suffer and sacrifice, make Indian women sublimate their desires. Further, due to traditional beliefs about purity and impurity of body, women belonging to the dominant Hindu religion have been subjected to various exclusionary rituals during menstruation and child-birth. As widows, they have been facing various discriminatory practices. Not to think of remarriage (as in case of widowers) their bodies are subjected to disfigurement (shaving off head), deprivation (single dhoti to cover body) and near starvation (a frugal single meal a day) and many times confinement to widow homes.

Moreover, Indian women have to face multiple patriarchies consisting of hierarchies of age and of relationships by marriage. They have also been abiding by, what Malashri Lal calls, “the law of the threshold” (The Law Title) and keeping themselves confined to the domestic duties in the inner courtyards of the joint family households. Similar to race in case of the black women, caste has added a worse dimension to the plight of dalit women. As farm labourers, they have been exploited even sexually by the upper class land-owners; and as widows, they have been forced to cohabit with brothers-in-law. Women belonging to the poor and down trodden sections of society are subjected to persecution through witch-making also. Jasbir Jain mentions:

Persecution of a woman as witch closes all doors upon her and it is usually the people in power who do it—priests, landlords, wealthy and rich people—often to camouflage and hide their own sins. Natural disasters like an epidemic, flood or famine are attributed to the presence of these women. (Roots 170)
Similarly the so-called privileged position of women as ‘devis’ or upgrading of a particular woman to the position of ‘devi’ is not only, says Jain in another book *Indian Feminisms*, “anti-individualistic” but “anti-humanistic” as well. It deprives women not only of personhood but of her emotional space and human communication also (10). These extreme positions (represented through images of Devi, Maneka and Sita-Sati-Savitri, and the witch) or what Jasbir Jain calls “polarized female identity” draw the attention of Indian feminists “who are opposing different kinds of power structures, not all of which are male, though the construction of many may be patriarchal. They are also carrying on a constant struggle against their own self image and the construction of femininity” (*Roots* 268) due to our country’s peculiar historical condition as well. For example, Indian Independence Movement by invoking the image of country as Bharat Mata imposed new expectations on Indian women by expecting them to be the custodians of cultural tradition “by lauding the spirit of endurance and suffering embodied in the mother” (Kumar, *The History of Doing* 2). Again, women’s bodies became the subject of oppressive patriarchal control (in the form of rape and practices like ‘Sati’ and ‘Jauhar’) during the riots which accompanied India’s independence and partition. In fact “the political programme of creating the two nations of India and Pakistan was inscribed upon the bodies of women” (Das, *Critical Events* 56).

However, in spite of all these, women in India have rarely expressed aggressive anger against men. It might be again, because of our peculiar historical conditions—firstly, in the pre-independent India, woman issues got merged into national issues as country’s independence was the common concern for both men and women; secondly, many reform movements for women, here (unlike the West) have been initiated by men. Further, unlike the West, in modern India, women had not to fight for political and economic rights as the Indian Constitution grants equal fundamental rights to women and men. But even then the suppression and oppression of female body is a glaring social reality in India.

The sample situation of women in three diverse cultures indicates that depending on diverse socio-cultural, religious, economic and ethnic factors, feminism is likely to have different priorities and strategies. And it is this aspect that has not only generated controversies, contradictions and debates within the movement from time to time.
time, but has also given birth to a large number of schools and shades of feminism (referred to collectively as ‘feminisms’ these days). The diversities within feminism are also because feminist responses and priorities have been changing according to changing experiences and situation of women. If at one time, demand for equal civil and political rights dominated feminist agenda, today it is the right over body which has become the dominant demand due to the postmodernist challenge to the unitary and totalitarian views about reality and its emphasis on subjectivity based on embodiment. That is why, what was once described as “the problem that has no name” has now become “a cluster of problems with many names” (Bowden and Mummery 14). However, it might not be denied that these very diversities have kept feminism alive and growing in spite of periodic fears about its losing relevance and reluctance of many women writers to be called feminists. Moreover, despite “different vocabularies and concepts” of different feminisms, says Indu Swami, “their analysis of women’s problems is essentially the same” and all of them believe in “breaking down male and female stereotypes” as a way to equal and better world (14). Jasbir Jain rightly remarks, “Perspectives differ, realities differ and histories are different as well. They do not flow like parallel lines that do not meet at any point but there are points when they meet and alter the flow of the other” (Roots 269) and doing so, they enrich the feminist discourse as well.

Referring to the major shared perceptions of various feminisms, Maggie Humm says that the first is “gender is a social construction which oppresses women more than men” and the second is “patriarchy shapes this construction” (“Feminist Literary Theory” 194). For this patriarchy has imposed a cluster of interlinked images like femininity, wifehood and motherhood on women’s bodies with the help of various social practices, rules and institutions. These images are interlinked in the sense that all of these aim at making women submissive and docile bodies and keeping them confined to the domestic domain. Moreover, by putting exaggerated emphasis on female embodiment and defining women in terms of their biological functions related to reproduction, patriarchy everywhere has made it the foundation of various assumption about “feminine normality” (Greer, The Eunuch 17). By playing this trick of biological constructionism, patriarchy has not only trapped women to the domestic domain but has
also kept the outer domain exclusively to itself. What is ironical is that in spite of the ‘inbuilt creativity’ of women’s bodies, they have been kept away from creative arts (including writing) for centuries by making writing a male domain—‘The female body carries within it the potential of procreation, yet despite or because of this inbuilt creativity, ambition, opportunity, freedom and power dominantly have a male face’ (Jain, Across Cultures 153). Women’s creativity is perceived to be confined to catering to male desire, bearing and rearing children and doing household chores. It is because “woman linked with body rather than mind was supposed to be antithetical to writing, an activity said to be restricted to the intellect” (Herndal, Feminisms 331). In fact, by creating this kind of, what Betty Freidan calls “the feminine mystique” (in her book of the same name) around the roles of wifehood and motherhood, and by propagating these as ideal models for all women, patriarchy has reduced the identity of women to sexual and social passivity. This oppression of women is not because of, says Indu Swami, “individual male malevolence but to the social and familial structures based on patriarchy” (“The Women Question” 13). This is what Gornick and Moran also affirm when they say “the fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles or our empty internal spaces but in our institutions—woman is made, not born” (135). This restrained and constrained situation of women is common to almost all cultures. Noting these commonalities, Jasbir Jain says:

In the Indian tradition the two polarities of feminine models have been the virgin goddesses and the seductive temptresses. The combination of the two results in the dutiful wife and the devoted lover. Similarly, if in the West we have Eve on one hand and the Rousseanist projection of woman as a malleable object on the other, in India we have the two polarities represented through Maneka and Savitri. (Across Cultures 208-9)

Another patriarchal tactic to control women’s bodies is the image of, what Germaine Greer calls, “eternal femininity” that puts pressure on women for remaining ever beautiful and well-groomed to be sought after by men. Hence, women are expected to work hard to defy their age and add to their physical appeal and value by following strict beauty regimens, elaborate bath rituals and hairdos, body-piercing, ornament-wearing and so on. This is what Iris Marion Young calls, “disciplines of the feminine”
to make female body “pretty by constraining fluid flesh, masking its organic smells with perfumes, painting skin, lips, eyes and hair that have lost their nubile luster” (Female Body Experience 5-6). These disciplinary exercises not only keep the women rooted in their body but also make them consider their body a burden.

To perpetuate this image of women’s eternal femininity, women have been further inculcated with a kind of “dissatisfaction with the body as it is and insistent desire that it be otherwise, not natural but controlled” (Greer, The Eunuch 293). And this process of feminization begins right since infancy with girl children being dressed up in frilly-fragile dresses and adolescent girls taught to be passive, shy and controlled yet coquettish. Thus all faculties of women are trained to be diverted towards maintaining body for male gaze. Same idea is echoed by Wollstonecraft when she says, “Taught from infancy that beauty is woman’s scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison” (A Vindication 131). This sense of dissatisfaction with the body is further extended to women’s self-loathing by making them consider their biological process of menstruation unclean, unhygienic and impure, and also by associating womb with trouble. Thus, women have been made to feel their bodies as a burden and a cause of shame and have been labeled as ‘leaky’ and impure bodies.

As if this chaining to, what Susan Bordo calls, “the realm of corporeal” was insufficient for women’s subjugation, they have also been associated with emotionality, irrationality and sensuality. Further, these characteristics have been perceived to be a threat and challenge to patriarchal order through “distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death” (Unbearable Weight 5). This is reflected in various cross-cultural myths, in which women plays seductresses. To allay this fear of femininity, man has devised various discursive practices favouring men at the cost of women. Creation myths, fables, codes of behaviour and dressing up, socio-religious rituals, and even words of abuse and derogatory sayings prevalent in almost all cultures reflect this.

This subjugation and control of women’s bodies is further maintained and supported visibly and invisibly, directly and indirectly by our social and religious
institutions, including marriage and family. For example, the institution of marriage is founded on women’s dependence status. In Christian ceremony it is “I now pronounce you man and wife” and not ‘man and woman” or ‘husband and wife”. In Hindu ceremony stress is on ‘Kanyadaan’ and privileged position of the groom and his family. Religion also plays a big role in the way women relate to their bodies through the concept of pure and impure bodies and unquestioning surrender to male authority. Thus, a woman “is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the absolute–she is the other” (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* XIX). By making binary pairs another foundation of the patriarchal norms, women have been further marginalized, for in these pairs maleness is taken as the norm and primary reference, and woman is defined in relation to or the absence of traits associated with man. Shobha De has remarked, “Women the world over are given a raw deal. A rotten one for this second sex, second class citizen status has always been the system” (*Shooting From the Hip* 110). Thus, by taking body as the starting point, man has constructed a web of cultural practices to marginalize and silence women and to maintain patriarchal control.

The worst aspect of this socio-culturally manipulated subjugation of women on the basis of sex difference is its perception as natural even by women themselves. Bell hooks calls this perception “the enemy within” (*Feminism is for Everybody* 12). Dorothy I. Riddle says that “sexism is so pervasive that we don’t even recognize it. It is like the air we breathe” (“Feminist Spirituality” 2). As a result women are “unconsciously more closely allied to the men in their lives than they are to women of other classes and races”, say Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn, “and so are more closely integrated with the dominant culture than is any other subordinate group” (“Feminist Scholarship” 14). Monique Wittig says in this context :

We have been compelled in our bodies and in our minds to correspond feature by feature, with the idea of nature that has been established for us. Distorted to such an extent that our deformed body is what they call ‘natural’, what is supposed to exist as such before oppression? Distorted to such an extent that in the end oppression seems to be a consequence of this ‘nature’ within ourselves (a nature which is only an idea). (“One is not Born a Woman” 220)
This internalized social conditioning of women makes them underestimate even their physical strengths. They are not as open with their bodies as are men because their imagined constraints do not let them use their physical strengths to the optimum. Iris Marion Young has discussed this aspect in detail in her essay “Throwing like a Girl”. She explains that women’s lack of confidence, fear of getting hurt, self-consciousness about appearing awkward and manly make them handle their bodies as “a fragile encumbrance”. That is why there is, she continues, not only “a typical style of throwing like a girl, but there is a more or less typical style of running like a girl, climbing like a girl, hitting like a girl”. This patriarchal conditioning of women’s minds instills in them “inhibited intentionality” leading to their self-imposed belief “I cannot” (166-173). This in turn detaches them from the domain of power and authority, leaving these to be male domain.

In fact, the patriarchal practices practiced over ages have inculcated in women an “interiorized inferiority” (Barrett, *Women’s Oppression Today* 113) to such an extent that they have come to not only overvalue men and undervalue themselves, but also “indoctrinate their children of both sexes in the very values by which they themselves have been indoctrinated to subordination” (Lerner “The Challenges” 170). For example, mothers insist on their daughters to be modest and mind the way they dress up, sit, talk and walk while they pamper their sons and give them more freedom and facilities. Thus, women themselves act as willing partners in promoting their own subjugation and perpetuating the institution of patriarchy. About this Virginia Woolf remarks, “women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (*A Room of One’s Own* 37). Thus women have no social identity of their own. They are known in relation to men—as daughters, sisters, wives or mothers—and not as independent human beings.

Feminists have analyzed that women’s sexual identity too, is subjected to patriarchal control with each culture having its own norms governing women’s sexual conduct. Any deviation from these cultural norms is enough to label a woman abnormal, perverted or immoral. Even expressing her physical and sexual desires is considered unnatural on her part because sexual desire and pleasure are perceived to be male prerogative, and female body is considered only an object to serve male desire.
Forced genital mutilation, prostitution, pornography, female contraceptives, sterilization and cosmetic surgery are some of the practices with which female sexuality and body are subjected to control. What is worse is that women are forced not only to remain under a constant surveillance of their bodies, but also to live under a constant threat of the violation of their bodies. Thus, it is through these ploys that men have constructed a grand narrative of their superiority over women, and have also succeeded in keeping the outer sphere exclusively to themselves. So whatever discrimination and subjugation women have been facing for ages is chiefly because of their female bodies, which are subjected to different forms of control.

An alarming twist in this whole situation is that in spite of various feminist movements, modernization and increasing number of educated and career-oriented women (notwithstanding business and marketing strategies of the beauty industry), women have come to care more than in the past about male sexual approval as is reflected in fad for zero figure and growing use of beauty enhancing treatments and body-altering surgeries. Rosalind Coward remarks in this context, “…women today are acceding more to the male definition of sexiness and to the policing of their sexuality inside and outside the bedroom” (“Slim and Sexy” 359). Another discouraging modern trend is that women have come to romanticize being called “super woman” or “super mom”. Willingly juggling between various roles— at work, at home and at social front—they fail to see that they have indirectly added to their own oppression. Even highly placed and successful CEOs find little respite from the responsibility of the so called female domain. “Women can’t have it all” though they have to “do it all” (Dutt 14). Not only this, they have to face gendered bias in organizational hierarchy and pay packages also. Thus, reality of life, even for modern educated, emancipated and financially independent women remains gendered and rooted in body. In fact, the old adage—the more the things change, the more they stay the same—applies to a large extent to the subjugated status of women. Only forms of oppression have changed, not the fact of oppression or subjugation of female bodies.

The above analyzed commonalities about women’s position in diverse cultures and times indicate that sexist bias against women cuts across the borders of race, culture and territory because biological constructionism exists in almost all cultures. By
devising various culture-specific discursive practices or by weaving, what Rosi Braidotti calls, “social imaginary” man has not only manipulated to control female body and sexuality but has also used it as a tool to legitimize women’s subjugation and as a “base for other social and mental exclusions” (Jain, Roots 16) and above all to establish his supremacy. Elaborating about this constantly manipulated marginalization and invisibility of women, Jasbir Jain remarks:

Women have traditionally been perceived as ahistoric, as outside time, and rendered silent and invisible. They have been excluded from public domain through domesticity, seclusion and subordination. Consequently, when they began to be visible, the concepts of heroism were layered with a sense of stoicism, sacrifice and noble suffering – such as in cases of Joan of Arc, Panna Dai and Sita. These portraits are laden with histories of self-denial and a superhuman ability to ignore the self, in fact, a total erasure. (Roots 219-20)

Thus by circulating various myths about femininity, patriarchy has expected women to bask in the glory of perceived womanly virtues of love, care, sacrifice and self-denial. In fact, the reality of women’s life is that in spite of their different perception of their embodied experiences (depending on their location in culture, time and space) they are bound by their biological similarity and the sexist bias they face. And it is to acknowledge the presence of the experiences of different women and to show their solidarity that the contemporary feminist discourse prefers to use the term, ‘women’ in place of ‘woman’. As Monique Wittig says:

Our first task… is to dissociate ‘women’ (the class within which we fight) and ‘woman’, the myth. For ‘woman’… is only an imaginary formation, while ‘women’ is the product of a social relationship…. Furthermore, we have to destroy the myth inside and outside ourselves. Woman is not each one of us, but the political and ideological formation… to confuse us, to hide the reality ‘women’. (“One is not Born a Woman” 223-24)

No doubt, feminists have been aware of the sexual difference being the root cause of women’s oppressive status earlier also, yet this aspect remained a kind of “absence or dismissal” (Shildrick, “Openings on the Body” 1) in feminist discourse because of the
anti-body bias of the dominant classical notion of subjectivity built on the dualism of mind and body. It was only when under postmodernist influence body gained centrality and significance in various disciplines that feminism not only began to endorse that body is “the only constant in a rapidly changing world” (Davis 3), but also began to reflect on female and male embodied experiences from a feminist perspective. It is because as Nelly Furman says, “From an empirical viewpoint, the body is a concrete, observable object; but viewed within a sign system, the body is a social signifier” (“The Politics of Language” 73) and a result of socio cultural conventions and perceptions. So, feminists now believe that though it is through the body that we live, have experiences in and gain knowledge of the world around; yet because of the expectations based on sexual difference, these experiences are different for and to the disadvantage of women, who are recognized as mere bodies which are either “decorated and exploited, or deprived and constrained” (Jain, Across Cultures 77).

Views discussed above do not mean that feminists are oblivious to the biological difference between male and female. Feminists acknowledge that female body has unique body experiences—menstruation, gestation, child-birth—and accompanying psychological experiences. But they contest patriarchy’s manipulation over centuries to establish a link between women’s biological processes and their incapacity and inability for intellectual exercise, and denial of freedom of choice to them. So, contemporary feminism, instead of fretting over the Freudian concepts of ‘the lack’ or ‘the penis envy’ focuses on celebrating and valuing the sexual difference to the advantage of women. This is what Neeru Tandon calls exploration of what have been earlier ‘devalued feminine characteristics” (A Paradigm Shift 65). It is this strategy of attaching value to female biological difference which makes contemporary feminism (also called ‘difference’ feminism) different from ‘equality’ feminism of nineteenth and early twentieth century. Whereas the latter strived for gender equality via political and legal reforms and women’s entry into education and work place, the former one aims at mitigating gender difference by prioritizing women’s right on themselves and their bodies. It is because as Rosi Braidotti says, “The body is a surface of intensities and an effective field in interaction with others” and so can serve as “as threshold of
transformations‖ (25) in the perceptions, position, images and assumptions surrounding female bodies.

This engagement of the feminists with body and sexual difference gains special significance in the contemporary world because of the increasing, though contradictory, expectations from feminism. If on the one hand, gender, lesbian and queer theorists are challenging conventional gender difference and sexual orientations, and modern technologies are changing perceptions about the body; on the other hand, biological difference (along with assumptions of male superiority and heterosexuality as normality) still rules and governs women’s destiny. Growing religious fundamentalism is also subjecting women’s bodies to control by prescribing codes of morality, behavior and dressing up, and also by subjecting women to physical punishment (even death) in case of non-conformity to these codes. Modern reproductive technologies and surrogacy are also establishing more control on women’s bodies with wombs being used as commercial factories to produce children or as spaces to hire. Growing beauty pageants (with their own restrictions on women’s code of conduct and dressing up), film festivals (Cannes Film Festival, 2015 refused to allow women, not wearing heels, on to the red carpet) and media are devising new strategies to perpetuate control on female body and its image as baby doll to cater to male fantasy and desires. So in spite of much claimed freedom and equality to women, women are still weighed down by sex and gender specific female subjectivity and dominant images imposed on female bodies.

It is this scenario which has made the feminists change their strategies. Feminists have realized that education, financial independence, civil and political rights to women have not been able to change social perception towards women substantially, and that the fight has to come from within the women. Hence, feminists now stress that women have to fight for the freedom from deep rooted subjugation with the very weapon of body, which men have been using to subjugate them. So, they want women not to loathe their bodies but to live comfortably in their bodies and embrace their biological (not socio-culturally constructed) difference with pride. For this, they emphasize the role of individual personal courage and perspective also to change the perception of society towards women. That is why feminism to-day has become more or less a call for “asserting difference, endowing the difference with dignity and prestige,
and insisting on it as a condition of self-definition and self-assertion” (Greer, *The Whole Woman* 3). This is what Jasbir Jain also affirms when she says, “to free ‘difference’ from subordination and exclusion, to become equal is the primary objective” (“Positioning the ‘Post’” 90). Consequently, feminist scholars are taking to a more systematic and wider exploration and interrogation of women as female socialized bodies as reflected in the works of Luce Irigaray, Susan Bordo, Judith Butler, Moira Gatens, Rosi Braidotti and Iris Marion Young. Writers like Young discuss in detail about the physicality of women bodies. They argue that even though there are women who do not choose or/do not have physical experiences like pregnancy, motherhood and wifehood, yet they have common physical experiences like menstruation and ‘breasted’ experience. Kathy Davis says in this context, “Bodies no longer represent how we fill into the social order, but are the means for self-expression, for becoming who we would most like to be” (“Embodying Theory” 2).

In this battle for the body or women (since both are considered synonymous in the dominant patriarchal discourse), literary studies have come to acquire an unprecedented role because of its double-edged influence—as a critique of the prevalent perceptions and as a medium to transform these perceptions. Talking about the impact of literary representation, Maggie Humm says “Through representation we shape our identities and our worlds…. women often become feminist by becoming conscious of, and *critising* the power of symbolic misrepresentation of women (“Feminist Literary Theory” 194). Nelly Furman also acknowledge the role of feminist writings or what she calls “woman *in* language” for bringing a transformation in society by “unveiling the prejudices at work in our cultural artifacts” and by allowing for “the possibility of sidestepping and subverting this power” (“The Politics of Language” 76). Books of literature, no doubt, have been a part of the movement earlier too, but with women studies becoming a widely studied subject in colleges and universities, and increase in the number of exclusive publishing houses for woman writings, literature has come to be seen not only as a powerful and effective tool of, what Bell hooks calls, “consciousness-raising” and “consciousness-changing” (*Feminism is for Everybody* 11) as well. Moreover, feminists have begun to stress that this, consciousness-changing
could be achieved best through writings by women, of women and for women or what is now being called women writings or writing women / body.

No doubt, there are thinkers like Gail Godwin and Cynthia Ozick, who says Showalter, believe in the concept of “genderless” or “sexless” creative imagination and stress on the writers’ need to rise above labels. However, majority of the feminist writers have faith in what Elaine Showalter calls, “a distinct female consciousness” (62) and opine that the lived experiences of women are best expressed by women because “the imagination cannot escape from the unconscious structures and strictures of gender identity” (“A Criticism of Our Own” 61). Sandra Gilbert also endorses this point of view:

…what is finally written is whether consciously or not, written by the whole person…. if the writer is a woman who has been raised as a woman—and I dare say only a very few biologically anomalous human females have not been raised as women—how can her sexual identity be split off from her literary energy? (“Feminist Criticism” 177)

Even Shashi Deshpande, a renowned Indian novelist, once told in an interview, “only a woman could write my books—they are written from the inside, as it were. Just as a woman cannot get deeply under a man’s skin, so too a man cannot fully appreciate the feminine experience” (Interview, Mathews). These feminist influences proved strong, attention shifted from andro texts (books by men) to gynotexts (books by women) for their role in making the earlier invisible gender visible and also in portraying women’s new images from women’s perspective in the context of newly emerging situations. It is because feminists feel that it is not only that gender leaves its traces on the literary texts, but literary texts, too, by influencing everyday conduct and attitudes over a period of time, tend to play a subtle though significant role in construction of the gender. In other words, these texts have the ability not only to portray the prevalent images but also the potential to rupture the dominant discourse by presenting subversive and alternative images, a significant step in feminist transformational politics.

That is why feminist writing, or what has come to be known as (due to the ‘body’ turn in feminism) ‘writing the body’ or ‘women writing’, has gained significance
in feminist discourse. This new turn owes much to French writers like Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray who tried to build a new cultural imaginary around female body in their highly rhetorical essays. Cixous in her famous essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” issued a clarion call to women writers, “Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it… let no one hold you back” (335). She describes two objectives of this writing—“to break up, to destroy” patriarchal structures and “to foresee the unforeseeable” through a transformation of social and cultural structures (334). For this she beseeches women writers to write “from and toward women” to liberate women from phallocentric control by celebrating and portraying sexual difference and using it to the advantage of women. Such texts, Cixous continues, are likely to raise conscience and create a bonding by making women, obviously readers, exclaim:

I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst—burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a stinking fortune. And I, too, said nothing, showed nothing; I didn’t open my mouth, I didn’t repaint my half of the world. I was ashamed. I was afraid, and I swallowed my shame and my fear. (335)

Luce Irigaray too, considers feminist writing to be a powerful strategy or textual performance to deconstruct the prevailing ideas about female body. Rejecting the dominant phallic discourse, she builds up a new imaginary in her essay “The Sex Which is Not One”. She speaks of women’s two “self touching lips” or having “sex organs more or less everywhere” (353). However, much more than being a writing about the corporeality of women, her essay is a rhetorical endeavour to explore the possibilities of creating a feminist discourse which has its starting point in the re-imagined female body and which have positive connotations for women. This is what Ann Rosalind Jones too emphasizes by calling upon to see female body as a direct source of writing and “shake off the mistaken and contemptuous attitudes toward their sexuality” in order to challenge phallocentric discourse (“Writing the Body” 365).
Black feminists, too, call upon their women to write the experiences of their flesh and blood comprising of the physical realities of their lives— which Cherrie Moraga explains:

…the exhaustion we feel in our bones at the end of the day, the fire we feel in our hearts when we are insulted, the knife we feel in our backs when we are betrayed, the nausea we feel in our bellies when we are afraid, even the hunger we feel between our hips when we long to be touched. (“La Jornada” XI)

She further extols the women to be prepared for “physical and psychic struggle” (xii) in order to touch and transform the lives of all the women around of whatever skin colour, sexuality they might be. Robin Morgan too calls upon women to see their bodies and themselves differently when she says, “we must begin, as women, to reclaim our land, and the most concrete place to begin is with our own flesh” (The Word of a Woman 77). Margaret Atwood, a Canadian feminist writer, also talks of feminists’ need “to say the unsaid to encourage women to claim their full humanity, which means acknowledging the shadows as well as the lights” (“Something Nice” 24), and “the shadows” here refers to issues related to female body and its experiences.

Under this global influence Indian feminist writers too, have realized the significance of body for feminist goals and have become vocal about making the body visible in women writings. For this they are not only taking into consideration western ideas governing women’s and society’s perception of women’s bodies; but are also trying to trace the indigenous roots of feminist strivings in the context of female body. However, they too, like feminists elsewhere, realize that it is mainly because of their female embodiment and its subjection to interlinked images of wifehood and motherhood that women face discrimination and oppression. They feel that the need for Indian women too, is to negotiate the images, ideals and roles thrust upon them by patriarchal structures— “between myth and reality there is a whole process of social questioning” (Jain, Across Cultures 80). So, they feel that by according centrality to women, their bodies and embodied experiences, writing the body becomes a manifestation of resistance to men’s centrality supported by religion, philosophy, law, language, cultural norms and social institutions. It also becomes for them a tool not only
to oppose disciplinary codes controlling female body and sexuality, but also to draw attention to women’s need for freedom and space:

It has to be achieved through the body because it is on the basis of its (body’s) attractiveness, docility and productivity that traditional role models have been constructed. Women have been worshipped for these virtues and discarded when they have failed in them. Thus any need for personal space, for working on new definition of freedom, for loosening the hold of tradition without destroying it, has to begin with the body and by redefining the values placed on womanhood. (Jain, *Across Cultures* 126)

Thus writing through body is emerging not only as the voice of early silent and invisible majority, but also as a means of transformation of women’s perception about themselves and society’s attitude towards them. Anees Jung observes this creeping change in *Unveiling India*: “Not long ago a woman who spoke about herself was considered a loose woman. To voice a pain, to divulge a secret was considered sacrilege, a breach of family trust. Today, voices are raised without fear, and are heard outside the walls of homes that once kept a woman protected, isolated” (91).

Since body and women are synonymous in dominant terms, writing the body or writing women has other dimensions too. It is because ‘writing women’ refers not only to writing about women, but also to women who write. Thus, by bringing women to the subject position of writing (making meaning) and emphasizing the centrality of female experience in the writing, this writing tradition also becomes a way to contest the dominant perception of writing as a male domain. Patricia Waugh rightly comments:

“Once women have experienced themselves as ‘subjects’ then they can begin to problematize and to deconstruct the socially constructed subject positions available to them, and to recognize that an invasion of the valuation of ‘maleness’ and ‘femaleness’ will not in itself undermine the social construction of masculinity and femininity”. (*Feminine Fictions* 25)

Moreover, writing the body signifies the need of female bonding or sisterhood by emphasizing the continuity and connectedness of female experience over ages and lands. It is because being in the “ing” continuous form (writing women/body), says
Jasbir Jain “… it connects the past with the present and reflects the ever continuing act of growth, development and self-assertion” (Across Cultures 53). So by emphasizing the need for sisterhood, this writing tries to dismantle another dominantly propagated image of women as creatures of mutual hostilities and jealousies. Bell hooks says that we had been socialized as females by patriarchal thinking “to see ourselves as inferior to man, to see ourselves as always and only in competition with one another for patriarchal approval, to look upon each other with jealousy, fear and hatred”. On the other hand, male bonding is considered “an accepted and affirmed aspect of patriarchal culture” (Feminism is for Everybody 14). That is why Helena Michie calls sisterhood as “the figural response” to patriarchal fatherhood (“Not one of the Family” 58) and a means to fight against women’s oppression. Hence like feminism, its component feminist literary studies (writings and criticism) is also a perspective, a position and a resisting stand taken in relation to the socio-cultural construction of gender (which equates women with body), and its implications for women. Therefore, writing through body becomes an attempt to shake the whole web of subjugating patriarchal practices, assumptions, perceptions, images and myths surrounding women and their bodies.

Writing body/woman implies another aspect i.e. reading of such literature from feminist perspective, or, what can also be called feminist reading. It is because ‘writing’, with readers as its target, expects them to play an active role in the explication of a text. Instead of expecting the reader to be “an assenting reader”, says Judith Fetterley, feminist reading expects the reader to be “a resisting reader” and intends to change their consciousness in “relation to what they read” (The Resisting Reader viii and xxii). A feminist reader tends to see whether the fictional discourse treats women from the patriarchal perspective or the feminist one. Thus, like feminist writing, feminist reading too has an agenda. If writing women/body or feminist writing requires the writer to create images and experiences of women in a gender-neutral mould and oppose patriarchal subjugation; feminist reading requires the same commitment from the reader, who is to see how and to what extent the linguistically constructed images follow feminist agenda by challenging and disrupting the logocentric tradition. Nelly Furman says “Feminist criticism unveils the prejudices at work in our appreciation of cultural artifacts and shows us how the language medium promotes and transmits the
values woven through the fabric of our society” (“Politics of Language” 59). Elaine A Showalter’s A Literature of Their Own (describing historical development of women writing since Brontes) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s The Mad Women in the Attic (studying major female writers of the 19th century) have contributed significantly towards initiating feminist reading as an important aspect of feminist literary studies. Thus, feminist reading has been reflecting “female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinition of self, art and society” (Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic xii). Moreover, feminist literary criticism has revealed that though social and literary practices differ from time to time and place to place, yet feminist writings display a kind of coherence of theme and imagery and supports the presence of a kind of continuity in feminist writing.

After discussing the main objectives of, the diversities within and commonalities of various feminisms and significance and centrality of body in feminist discourse; it is now time to explore the issues of agency, subjectivity, identity, self, autonomy and sexuality and their role in women’s desire for control over their own bodies and lives. These terms, though not synonymous, are interlinked in the sense that they imply women’s autonomy or articulation of the self. Like many other concepts in the context of feminism, these terms have evoked divergent and many times conflicting opinions also; but they, nonetheless, serve as significant feminist strategies in our exploration of the possibilities of empowering women, an important objective of feminism. This empowerment begins with an awareness of one’s existence and or desire for freedom from every kind of dependence, exploitation and injustice. Thus, this freedom is not only “freedom from” but as as Kelkar and Gangavane say, “freedom to” also (“Theoretical Reflection” 25). In the context of women, it is a “freedom from” their gendered identity, their subjugated mental conditioning and their own perceptions and “freedom to” realization of their aspirations. Thus, it “presupposes an awareness of one’s own existence as a person, heavily positive self-image and the ability to think” (Kelkar 11)

This self-empowerment or focus on the self gains significance in the feminist discourse, because in the dominant discourse ‘self’ is conceptualized in relation to men only. Women, considered the ‘other’, have their identity (social, economic and sexual)
in relation to men only—“Women have traditionally been treated as ahistoric…. Because they have lived through men” (Jain, Across Cultures 12). In transforming these constructed identities and linking these with the women’s self, the body becomes significant because, as Anita Singh observes:

This growing visibility of the body is viewed as a modern symptom; here question of self has become important, lending perspective to the idea that a person’s sense of self is largely consolidated through their bodies. Women writers examine how women live with and in their bodies and contend with what culture makes of such bodies. Writing becomes in their hands the one means to insert the female body into the public realm, to restore balance of gaze that constantly identifies it as an object and not subject of sexual desire. (“Stairway to the Stars” 29-30)

Feminists have also realized that this process of selfhood is not easy because an interrogation of the dominant discourse requires “a certain kind of competency in the use of skills in self-discovery, self-definition and self-direction” (Bowden and Mummery 134). Further, this self or subjectivity is not something external. It is internal and consists of internal consciousness or what Descartes calls ‘cognito’— “I think, therefore I exist” (Discourse 54) — and also an awareness of one’s situation, strengths and abilities in relation to external forces (i.e. patriarchal paradigms for the feminist purpose). This assertion of self expects women to become active, ‘the subject’ instead of remaining in the passive mode or ‘the other’ situation. So, this requires women to be aware of their subjugated status and to be willing to come out of the ‘body’ focus. They should also act by challenging and transgressing culturally constructed and imposed images of womanhood on them. Moreover, this selfhood is not static. It is a process—“made of constant shifts and negotiations between different levels of power and desire, that in to say, willful choice and unconscious drives” (Braidotti 18). That is why Braidotti has used the image of nomadic subjects to refer to an alternative vision of women’s subjectivity or selfhood. Thus selfhood as a process, is always in the making. It keeps on changing in response to new situations and challenges in life by pressurizing the subject “to seek new, non-contradictory subject positions”; and herein lies “the possibility of transformation” of the subject (Belsey, “Constructing the Subject” 597).
So, at times, assertion of selfhood or subjectivity involves contradictions. It enables as well as inhibits the subject in her march towards selfhood. It poses difficulty as well as challenges. Hence, a woman on the way to selfhood is never passive or docile:

... she none the less exists as a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices. She is also a subject able to reflect upon the discursive relations which constitute her and the society in which she lives, and able to choose from the options available.

(Weedon, *Feminist Practice* 125)

Further, this process of selfhood works through the power of agency i.e. the ability to think and choose, the courage to take action and the readiness to own responsibility of all the consequences. This involves, say Bowden and Mummery:

...their [women’s] desire to be able to choose and act freely in accordance with their own objectives, to have some sense of entitlement to real choices and objectives, to be able to act against their subordination and, perhaps most importantly, to have a sense that they can be true to themselves”. (123)

Hence, in the feminist discourse, selfhood amounts not only to resorting to resistance, rebellion, transgression and assertion, but also refusing to co-opt into oppressive patriarchal practices through one’s behaviour and actions.

This opposition to patriarchal practices through selfhood and assertion of agency is multidimensional and extends to women’s right over their bodies and their exercise of sexuality. Moreover, this issue of sexuality gains significance in the feminist discourse, because in the dominant patriarchal discourse sexuality implies male sexuality and the focus is on male pleasure and sexual initiative. This dominant discourse has not only made women’s bodily desires a hidden and forbidden continent, but has also reduced women to passive objects of male desire. Moreover, it describes female sexuality, says Shoshna Felman, “as an absence (of the masculine presence), as lack, incompleteness, deficiency, envy with respect to the only sexuality in which value resides” (“Women and Madness” 8). Further, through its anti-women and anti-body practices (like female
genital mutilation, use of chastity belts, honour killings, pornography, prostitution, wife-bartering, abusing, beating, rape and sexual ownership), this discourse has tilted the power relations to favour patriarchy. Moreover, it not only expects women to be silent about their sexual desire but also takes no time to label them as pervert, immoral or abnormal at their slightest deviation from culturally set norms of sexual and moral conduct. It is this denial or suppression of women’s sexuality or what Germaine Greer calls their desexualization or castration, that makes women powerless. So to enable women to gain power over their bodies and lives, Greer gives the concept of ‘the whole woman’. Such a woman should not only be self-assertive and aware of her aspirations and desires, but should also refuse to “embody male sexual fantasies or rely upon man to endow her with identity and social status” (*The Whole Woman* 9).

Hence, assertion of self or subjectivity through expression of sexuality also becomes a defiance of the patriarchal system, which considers women to be intuitive, docile passive, emotional and irrational bodies. However, this socio-cultural construction of women/body keeps feminists moving towards their objective of social transformation. They hope that since ‘women’ are ‘made’, not born, they can be ‘remade’ by changing the meanings of femininity through persuasive and subversive writings. Thus, in the context of feminism, literary writings become a kind of rhetoric to be used to challenge patriarchal constructs surrounding female bodies:

“No woman, we know, is ever out off from the real male world; but in the world of ideas we can draw boundaries that open up new vistas of thought, that allows us to see a problem in a new way”. (Showalter, *Literature of One’s Own* 161)

That is why contemporary feminist discourse, facing new and complex challenges (from advancement in technology and emergence of queer studies) all over the globe, advocates using body as a site in the “struggle for the achievement of women’s equality, dignity and freedom of choice to control our lives and bodies within and outside the home” (Bhasin and Khan 6). As a result, women writers all over the globe are using body as a site to re-examine, re-think, re-write and re-right through literature “the way certain assumptions about women and the female character enter into the fundamental assumptions that organize all our thinking” (Jehlan 75). These writers, through their
literary works are addressing the questions related to image-representation, subjectivity, selfhood, sexuality and power-relations. In doing so, they are not only establishing the earlier invisible gender i.e. women as writers, new characters and readers; but are also making them active participants in producing culture.

This global trend had its impact on Indian literary scene too, and women/body began to gain importance as a site to raise voice against patriarchal subjugation in English as well as regional literatures. Attempts also began to be made to trace indigenous roots of feminist tradition in the context of female body, and document history of feminist articulations (as expressed in oral traditions, folk songs, sharing sessions, bhakti movement and written discourse in the form of autobiographical and argumentative writings) in various Indian languages. The Bhakti Movement, stretching over centuries and in different regions of India, might be called precursor of “India’s early modernity” (Bhagwat, “Heritage of Bhakti” 166) and Indian feminism. Namita Gokhale also talks about this movement as a literary revolution in resisting the growing repressive aspects of Hinduism and articulating self-assertion (Interview by Lydon). It is because many women poet saints expressed consciousness of body and awareness of gender discrimination in their poems. Transgression of fixed gender rules and roles, a significant aspect of women writings, might be traced back to as early as the sixth century in the songs of Mutta, a Buddhist nun, who expressed her happiness in getting freedom from mortar, pestle and “my [her] twisted lord” (68) or what is now called domestic domain. Similarly, Janabai belonging to Varkari sect in thirteenth century says, “Let me not be sad because I am born a woman” and “My Lord / I have become a slut / to reach your home” (Tharu and Lalita Vol.1, 82-83). Mahadeviakka, a Kannada saint poet, addresses the nakedness of female body in her songs as she not only walked out of her marriage, but also discarded her clothes, a symbol of gendered identity (Ramanujan, “Talking to God” 12). Women saints like Mira Bai also questioned patriarchal control of their bodies and male defined domestic space. In nutshell, these women saints dared to challenge the dominant discourse in their own way:

…. They had to not only contend with the superiority of the god-like husband figure but also to bypass him; they also had to define their choices clearly because the choices were related to marrying or staying single, coping with
sexual desire, negotiating the body and its involuntary processes, and giving up or adhering to motherhood roles. (Jain, *Roots* 131)

What is worth noting about these women bhakts is that though they displayed resistance to gender constraints by asserting their right to choose the way of bhakti, yet their questioning was accompanied by their subordination or surrender to their gurus (who were often male) or the gods whom they loved. However, the questioning of gender boundaries accompanied by a refusal to surrender, an awareness of the self (a modern concept) and a critique of society’s double moral standards began to be articulated in different regional languages only in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Works like *Stree Purush Tulana* by Tarabai Shinde, autobiographies of Rassundari Devi, Pandita Rama Bai, anonymous *Simantini Upadesh* and Sarla Devi’s *The Rights of Women* are a few examples. Sarala Devi wrote in 1934:

> Today, the inner self of the woman aspires to freedom. She is determined to overcome all the obstacles that stand in the way of liberation. The continued closing-in of her inner self can never be accepted. This has become intolerable, especially now. And because it is unbearable now, there is a fire of rebellion. (157)

Awareness of men’s fear of women’s bodies finds expression in Kalyanikutty Amma’s argumentative writing “Some Obstacles in the Way of Inequality between the Sexes”. Linking men’s fear to female biological functions, she writes:

> The mystery of the rhythms of the female body—menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth—challenged the human powers of comprehension…. The fear of Woman’s dark powers that sprang up so vigorously within ancient Man have condensed into certain misgivings in the Unconscious of modern Man. (175)

Subversion of patriarchal authority and criticism of social subjugating practices imposed on women find expression in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s “Sultana’s Dream” (1905), which is in the form of a satire and portrays a feminist Utopia. There are numerous other women writers who attempted to express women’s awareness of the self through their writings. In doing so, many of these writers compared their situation with women of other times, cultures, religions and castes. Thus, they did what women
writings are doing now— “simultaneously building up solidarity (in terms of gender) and pointing out the possibilities of a more equal social system” (Jain, *Indigenous Roots* 182). However, like the earlier western feminists, these Indian women writers too, had the privilege of education, affluent background and exposure to western knowledge. So, consciousness and transgression of patriarchal subjugation and feminist awareness of the self in modern India also owes much to the Western influence. This influence is one of the major factors which have led feminist scholars like Susie Tharu, Lalita and Annie Zaidi to bring to limelight the marginalized women writings in India, and has stimulated feminist critics like Jasbir Jain, Maitrayee Choudhuri, Indu Swami, Sushila Singh to explore the indigenous roots of feminist articulations. Again, this influence has enabled scholars like Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty to carve a niche in international feminist academia. This influence has also led contemporary creative writers—like Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapoor, Kiran Desai, Namita Gokhale, Shoba De, Suniti Namjoshi, Ruth Vanita, Kavita Daswani, Nikki Pasha— to portray women’s selfhood, sexuality and control over their mind and body through their writings. Their writings might not bring about comments Anita Singh, “a magical reversal but it does strengthen their capacity to build the stairway to the stars” (29) Thus, Indian feminist writers and scholars are attempting “to explore women’s invisible experiences in terms of new images, representations, forms and styles and to evolve a critical language which express these systematically” (Pandit, 309).

Namita Gokhale, whose fictional women have been chosen for the present study, also, uses body as a site to interrogate and subvert various images imposed upon female body in her novels. She also explores related feminist issues like agency, selfhood and sexuality even though till recently she has resisted being labeled a feminist (Interview by STPTV). However, her earlier denial did not stop her from advocating feminist concerns in theory as well as practice. She seems to be following Bell hooks, who makes a distinction between “I am a feminist” and “I advocate feminism”. Whereas the first statement, says hooks, seems to refer to “some personal aspect of identity and self-definition” (31), the second statement shows a commitment to feminist concerns while “avoiding linguistic structures that give primacy to one particular group” (*From Margin to Center* 32). Moreover, Gokhale’s endorsement of
androgynous perspective i.e. belief in the co-existence of masculine and feminine characteristics in every human being—“we all carry a lot of man and woman in ourselves. Every marriage has two men and women in it…. I don’t take strict gender positions” (Interview to Kapur)—along with her seminal essay “Gender and Literary Sensibility” clearly shows her commitment to the feminist concerns. In fact, androgyny (to which Gokhale refers to sometimes) is also a feminist model. It was advocated by early second wave feminists as a means to bring equality for women by bringing an end to the dominant gender implications and divisions. Iris Marion Young explains:

“These androgynous persons in the transformed liberated society would have no categorically distinct forms of dress, comportment, occupation, propensities toward aggression or passivity, associated with their embodiment. We would all be just people with various bodies. (On Female Body Experience 13)

Though this ideal did not appeal for long to the feminists, yet it succeeded in drawing attention to women’s equality by transgressing fixed gender roles and rules. Nevertheless, Gokhale’s essay “Gender and Literary Sensibility” (discussed in detail in Introduction) of the present study not only reveals her feminist sympathies, but also focuses on the challenges for women writings. Her another essay “Women’s Writers” also repeats these ideas—“Articulation is the first step in the process of empowerment” and “a literary voice has to rise above the compulsions of the immediate if it is to move from propaganda to art” (42). Thus, what Gokhale rejects is feminist propaganda in the name of creative writing—“The increasing exoticisation and commodification of women’s issues for tailored market makes things worse, and leads only to an inevitable marginalization of these ideas and writings” (41). Thus, rejecting portrayal of women as victims in the name of feminist writing, Gokhale stresses upon the writer’s need to rise above “a male-modulated role simulation”. She laments:

Yet, even today, when women write as women, they often write not in their unique voice as a fragment of creative consciousness positioned to view an endlessly expanding horizon. They write instead as victims of biology, gender and circumstance, from within the bars, as it were. (“Gender and Literary Sensibility” 67)
Thus, Gokhale advocates the portrayal of women’s self-assertion and transgression of subjugating patriarchal images, structures and conventions imposed on women. She also suggests the feminist writers to develop “a franker attitude to sexuality” by moving out of “the hushed silences of upper middle class drawing rooms into the real world”, and refers to her first novel Paro and Shobha De’s works as examples in this context. Again, when she says, “The sexual battle place is an arena for defining their [women’s] individuality as humans” (66), she reveals her support for using ‘body’ as a site to raise feminist issues. She also supports the feminists’ stress on the need for developing sisterhood through her plea for “shared experience and the balm of bonding”. Thus, her essay “Gender and Literary Sensibility” testifies not only her faith in women writing— “the relentless articulation of women’s writing must continue”—and its agenda, but also cautions feminist writers “to rise above the ceiling”(68) by responding to newly emerging situations. So, the essay might be called a kind of preface to her novels which fall into the category of women writing. It is because Gokhale follows these precepts in almost all of her novels. Moreover, despite her deliberately created illusions (by taking up multiple issues in her narratives), her novels foreground issues related to women. Her women are portrayed through body, which implies that Gokhale not only makes the dominant gender difference visible, but also manipulates her narratives to interrogate patriarchal hegemony through subversive images of women.

Gokhale’s novels reveal her awareness that fixed images, myths, rituals and stereotypes are patriarchal strategies to gain and maintain control of women and their bodies, so that “the body feels disconnected from itself, as though it does not belong to it and has no agency” (Katrak 2). Hence, Gokhale uses body as a site to dismantle these constructs and explore feminist issues of agency, selfhood and sexuality. That is perhaps why her novels have an overwhelming presence of women who control the narratives as well. To draw attention to the dominant gender difference, Gokhale makes these women begin their journey as embodied beings in the patriarchal setup. However, her feminist point of view makes these women assert and aspire for selfhood. So, using their embodied experiences as lessons, they try to rise above the image of docile and passive bodies. It is this new perspective of conceptualizing women and their bodies which makes Gokhale’s novels feminist writings because “the most powerful ideas are
those we think with. They are the ideas that lie behind our eyes, enabling us to see; what we see, is shaped by them” (O’Conn 47). That is why Gokhale’s women are rarely seen rooted in the traditional roles of housekeeping and rearing children. Many of her women (Phoolwati, Priya, Shakuntala) subvert the stereotyped image of wifehood which “encourages the male to be aggressive, self-centred, desirous of power and control over others” (Jain, Across Cultures 100). They also seek to integrate the public and the private space (depicted prominently in Gods, Graves and Grandmother, collapse two sets of sexuality and morality (foregrounded in Paro, Priya and Shakuntala) and defy the dominant myth of spirituality as the male domain (Shakuntala). Thus, makes her women systematically dismantle images of feminine beauty, womanhood, wifehood/widowhood and motherhood imposed on female body.

Since transgression of the dominant patriarchal images and structures requires self-assertion, Gokhale uses female agency as a significant strategy to empower her women. She vests her women with the capacity to think, decide, act and assert their rights as human beings. So, her women not only subvert the dominantly perceived image of women as objects of men’s decision and desire but also put brave battle in the crises they face. Doing so, they make efforts to utilize their physical as well as mental abilities to the maximum as opposed to the “inhibited intentionality” linked with the stereotyped images. They also call for the need to address women’s aspirations, desires and needs (including the physical ones) and assert their need to love rather than being the objects of love. No doubt, as humans they are portrayed as creatures of contradictions and weaknesses too, yet their self-assertion and confidence make them march towards that world of self-realization where “the body and bodily experiences become a way of knowing” (Jain, Across Cultures 71). In this journey of selfhood, exploration of female sexuality figures prominently in almost all novels of Gokhale, because she is aware that the dominant discourse has desexualized women through patriarchal control of their bodies. Thus, her novels seem to endorse that assertion of the self also implies women’s control on their bodies and assertion of their sexuality.

To portray these issues surrounding female body, Gokhale uses mainly the backdrop of Indian geography, culture, characters, folklore and mythology. Nevertheless, her works have a global feminist appeal. This is because being aware of a
creative writer’s chief concern i.e. presentation of the point of view— which in her case turns out to be the feminist one— she uses literary strategies to the best advantage of feminism. Like women writings everywhere, her novels also portray that self-assertion is the way to selfhood and that women have to pay a heavy price for this. Further, Gokhale’s consciousness of cross-cultural readership in this globally shrinking world makes her interpolate skillfully the details of local folklore in the narratives. Moreover, it should not be ignored that the chief concern of a creative writer is not to create “national allegories in their fiction”. It is as Rosemary M. George says, to focus on “the many varied aspects of everyday life or of the imagination in their texts” (227). And Gokhale does so effectively with the help of her artistic excellence as revealed in her preferred effective use of the first person narrative technique, intertextual referencing and unpretentious use of English language mixed with code switching. Moreover, her skilful weaving of humour with grimness and satire, and her skillfully devised different combination of these techniques in each novel make reading her novels an aesthetic pleasure as well.

Thus aware of the centrality and significance of body as well as the literary aesthetics in the feminist literary discourse, Gokhale makes conscious and articulate attempts to use body as a site to reveal her feminist concerns. Though she has refused to be labeled a feminist till recently, yet that did not stop her from portraying feminist issues. Her fictional works testify that “The word ‘feminist’ implies a certain stance vis-à-vis women: it implies not only a concern with gender difference in general but taking up the perspective of women specifically. It implies identification with women’s concerns” (Kaplan 1). In case of Gokhale’s novels, these women’s concerns turn out mainly to be interrogation and subversion of the patriarchal images like eternal femininity, wifehood, motherhood and wifehood imposed on women and their bodies. Moreover, she interweaves all these images and issues in almost all of her novels. However, keeping in view the confines of the present study as well as the plan of Gokhale’s novels, each succeeding chapter focuses on the image/issue in the context of the novel/novels foregrounding it. Moreover, as pointed out earlier, the analysis depends not on one particular school of feminism but on the insights given by different feminist writers on ‘body’ and the images and issues surrounding female body. For
example, to explore the concepts of body and gender construction the study draws on the ideas of writers like Hélène Cixous, Moira Gatens, Iris Marion Young, Margrit Shildrick and Alexandra Howson. To find the indigenous roots of feminist strivings, the study depends chiefly on explorations made by writers like Jasbir Jain, Maitrayee Chaudhuri, Tharu and Lalita, and Annie Zaidi. For analysis of the image of eternal femininity, the study owes much to the ideas of Germaine Greer, Naomi Wolf and Susan Bordo. For the issues related to sexuality and selfhood, the analysis depends on reflections made by Judith Butler, Hélène Cixous and Jasbir Jain. Exploration of the issues of sisterhood and spiritual feminism seeks guidelines from ideas of Bell hooks, Dorothy I. Riddle and Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan. Last but not the least, the study relies on Namita Gokhale’s views on women writing as revealed in her seminal essay “Gender and Literary Sensibility”, another essay “Women’s Writers” and her various interviews.

How body serves as a site for bending gender rules by challenging the purported patriarchal linkage of mind with male and body with female, and further of the female body with the lack of physical and mental strengths, would be the focus of analysis in the next chapter. Taking up Gokhale’s novel *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* and analyzing the portrayal of its women characters, the chapter would also try to show how Gokhale dismantles the myths surrounding wifehood and widowhood, and upholds sisterhood as one of the effective means to fight patriarchal subjugation and oppression of women.

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