CHAPTER III

*Personal is Political: A Theoretical Perspective*

“Feminist criticism” … is a specific kind of political discourse: a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism, not simply a concern for gender in literature, at least not if the latter is presented as no more than another interesting critical approach on a line with a concern for sea-imagery or metaphors of war in medieval poetry…. There are, of course, different political views within the feminist camp. My point here is … simply to insist that recognizable feminist criticism and theory must in some way be relevant to the study of the social, institutional and personal power relations between the sexes.

(Toril Moi “Feminist Literary Criticism” 204; emphasis added)

The *Personal is Political* was a frequently heard feminist rallying cry, especially during the late 1960s and 1970s. It was radical feminism which fostered the claim that *Personal is Political*. As Willis states in “Radical Feminism & Feminist Radicalism” (1984), Radical Feminism is a “current” within feminism that focuses on the theory of patriarchy as a system of power that organizes society into a complex of relationships based on an assumption of “male supremacy” that used to oppress women.

Early radical feminism, arising within second-wave feminism in the 1960s, rejected traditional definitions of both politics and theory while condemning all previous political theory as patriarchal. Unlike, liberal feminists or socialist and Marxist feminist, radical feminists locate the root cause of women’s oppression in patriarchal gender relations.
Chronologically, radical feminism can be seen within the context of second wave feminism, lasting from 1968 to 1973. A strong autonomous feminist movement, named Women’s Liberation Movement emerged as the ideology of radical feminism in the United States with its claims for the emancipation of women, but also the more prosaic and long-standing campaigns were revitalized as equal pay claims and movements for changes in laws and to provide for equal opportunities. The pioneers of this phase of radical feminism included feminist like Shulamith Firestone, Anne Koedt and Carol Hanisch as individuals.

As a form of practice, radical feminists introduced the use of consciousness raising groups (CR groups). Consciousness raising became one of the key activities that underpinned the radical feminism and made it distinct from its forbears, and announced the emergence of a very different kind of political organization. According to Echols, as stated in Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, (1989) this idea of consciousness raising “was taken from the idea of ‘speaking pains to recall pains’ used by peasants during the Chinese revolution” (84). The idea was that women should regularly collect in small groups over an agreed period of time and give accounts of their own lives and how they ‘became’ a ‘woman.’

As a result, it was anticipated that all the women involved might look askance at their own lives and realize the extent to which they share experiences with other women of various backgrounds and class; that their problems are not unique and individual, but rather all too common, and produced by wider social relations and institutions.

Most CR (consciousness raising) groups expected women to make the commitment to turn up regularly, to build up a strong relationship of mutual
support. Perhaps never before had the personal circumstances of each member of a political group been the subject of such intense scrutiny by the rest of its members, and this underlined the informal aspect of feminist politics, that it was constant process of evolution.

Thus, it embodied the central edict that the *Personal is Political* intended to awaken women to injustices of their social position but also to encourage them to actively reassess their personal and emotional lives – so that in a real and literal sense feminism was expected to have a life-changing effect on each of its participants.

The slogan *Personal is Political* was used by radical feminist to combat the charges that women’s problems are merely personal complaints. The category ‘women’ therefore includes women of racial and economic privilege who would not have been considered oppressed according to existing progressive theories. Oppression is common to all women. Oppression has to be defined subjectively. The prevailing patriarchal categories do not get altered but are merely reversed. The related problem is that many women either did not feel oppressed, or, if feeling it did not submit it. The idea of expression is necessary for some kind of evidence that women are harmed by sexist assumptions and behavior.

The exact origin of the phrase *Personal is Political* is unknown and sometimes debated. Robin Morgan, coined the phrase in her book *Sisterhood is Powerful*, published in 1970. It is radical feminism which fostered the claim that the *Personal is Political* and “*Sisterhood is Powerful*”, a formulation that arose from the consciousness raising sessions.
The conception ‘Personal is Political’ has been in danger of becoming something of a cliché. Yet it is the sheer fecundity of the maxim which has allowed it so broad and popular a usage. From it has sprung a new praxis: that of sexual politics. As discussed prior the claim that the Personal is Political is intimately related to the idea of consciousness raising, which yields both a theory of patriarchy and a programme for action, drawn from the lives of individual women. Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach in, Outside In. Inside Out. Women’s Psychology: A Feminist Psychanalytic Account (1982) illustrates the connections clearly:

Within the consciousness – rising group each person’s experience, each woman’s life story was a matter of interest. We understood that through listening to an individual’s experience we could draw a much richer picture of how society was put together. Sexual politics provided an understanding of how society works both at an ideological level and at a material level and deepened the understanding the left had of human experience. The Women’s Liberation Movement built an analysis of society founded on the nuts and bolts of individual life experience. It enlarged and challenged previous understanding the social, economic and political basis of society. (12)

Conventional conceptions of politics, whether instrumental or institutional, have presumed that politics is distinguishable from and stands in opposition to the personal. Such a notion is resonant only because of the dichotomous thinking, which originated from the western thought.

Western thought is fundamentally dualistic. The unending debates within it suggest that the boundaries between dualities have some fluidity, since they are continually contested. As a result, series of binary oppositions prevail, which structure their horizons: mind-body; subject-object; reason-passion; form-content; culture-nature; order-chaos, and so on. In politics they spawn
related antithesis, such as state-individual; public-private; universal-particular. Correlating with them is a further polarity: male-female. Indeed, this is often treated as the primary dualism and used to illustrate, or give meaning to, the rest.

There is an alignment, or correspondence, between the first-mentioned terms and between the last-mentioned. They are further aligned with a set of evaluative terms such as good-bad, superior-inferior. The relationship between these terms is not, then, one of reciprocity. Two consequences ensue. First, and most obviously, the relationship between the terms is a hierarchical one, that is the first – mentioned component is to dominate the second. The binary oppositions are a set of evaluative terms such as good-bad, superior-inferior. Their relationship is not, then, one of reciprocity.

The above mentioned binaries ensue, the relationship between terms is a hierarchical one: that is the first mentioned component is to dominate the second, by force or will or knowledge. And second, it is the first-mentioned term which is posited as a standard, or norm, gaining its identity by distinguishing itself from its antithesis – that which it is not. It is positive, central; its opposite is negative, other. Both consequences have had profound inference for the treatment of women.

The basic opposition underlies all the discussions of actual men–women relationships, often lending to them a profound but unstated resonance, which helps to account for women’s enduring subjection. As it is obvious: male is to dominate female. Women’s oppression has been related to their location in a different social sphere from that of men. Two such binary divides have been the public/private and natural/civilized domains.
Public/Private Domain: Social/Sexual Contract:

The liberal political origins of the public/private concept lie in the writings of the social contract theorists, such as Hobbes and Rousseau, and their attempt to explain the genesis of the legitimacy of government and the state. The social order that emerged from the social contract comprised two spheres: the one, public and political, and the other, private and removed from politics. The key significance of this distinction lies, in its perceived role in securing individuals freedom. Only men were deemed to possess the capacities for citizenship and thus the public realm was necessarily a masculine one. As Plato stated in Republic that the main division however, a sexual one: “A man’s virtue lies in knowing how to administer the state while a woman’s is to order her house, and keep what is indoors, and obey her husband” (441).

For the social contract writers, women were beings whose sex prevented them from having the same political standing as men. Therefore women were incorporated into the new social order differently from men, via the private sphere. This private sphere is a place associated with reproduction and domesticity, with the organic, the necessary and the emotional. Since this status is natural, it is never presented as oppressive; it is accepted that women occupy a lower echelon among the ranks of humanity. They are incapable of the freedom and rationality and are therefore excluded from its noblest: the art of politics.

In the writings of Rousseau, as a social contract theorist, we have a clear example of the ideological function of public/private concept. Rousseau through his works The Social Contract and Discourses (1913) and Emile (1911) defines a differential virtue and function for the two sexes, and how females be trained for their particular role in manner quite different from that of males. Rousseau
begins his Second Discourse, On the Origin of Inequality, with a distinction between two types of human inequality: natural and moral/political. Only the first sort of inequality exists in the original state of nature, and while it is insufficient to engender any natural authority. The Rousseauian natural concept is truly pre-social: isolated and self-sufficient. Natural woman/man suffers neither the scarcity nor conceptualization of difference, which would provoke competition for gain and glory. Rousseau’s account of the transition from natural to civil society reveals a process of degeneration. Natural liberty is lost to civic servitude; the natural individual is corrupted by empty values and false needs.

The Social Contract is Rousseau’s ideal solution of the political association of which civil society is born. It is on this base that the domestic and political relations are therefore more sharply distinguished as Rousseau discovers a natural distinction between sexual roles, pass off the sexual division of labor as a natural one. “Nature teaches us that they should work together, but the each has its own share of the work” (Emile 326). There is no suggestion that inequality is being introduced, only a mutually beneficial complementarity.

The natural woman/man’s development has important implications for Rousseau. As he mentions in The Social Contract that women must participate as citizens if the required generality of Will is to manifest itself. The General Will is an ideal, a particularly male interest. If women attempt reversal of the General Will, then it is dangerous and artificial. The ‘law of nature’, Rousseau contend in Emile, “bids the woman obey the man” (Emile 370). The only natural society, Rousseau accepts in The Social Contract, is the family, where “the ruler corresponds to the father” (Social 4). In other words, Rousseau has gratuitously taken as his model of what is natural for women, that arrangement
which emerged at a particular stage of development, namely the patriarchal family.

The evolution of patriarchal families is associated with other simultaneous developments. It is only with stable pairing that men become aware of their paternity: a knowledge which soon looks for undertaking and justifies control over every aspect of women’s lives. Hence two quite different spheres, each with its own values and significance, will develop: the private, familial one where love, romance and womanhood flourish and its public antithesis where only men are active.

Rousseau’s account of woman’s ideal nature and public role in *Emile* is a minute study of the qualities a woman must have in order to fulfill her natural function with virtuosity. Made for man’s delight, she must service and charm him since to bear him legitimate children and win his love for them is her proper business. Her duties are to please, attract, counsel and console her mate; to ‘make his life pleasant and happy’. In order to cultivate the good reputation that is necessary to persuade her master of her fidelity, she is modest, retiring and devoted. In order to compensate for the man’s greater strength she cultivates her own powers, which lie in cunning, beauty, wit and wiles. She rules by gentleness, kindness and tact; by caresses and tears; by modesty, distance and chastity. She simultaneously allures and repels, stimulates her husbands’ desire only to succumb with reluctance. Although all these qualities require careful nurturing, Rousseau is adamant that they are quite natural:

The obedience and fidelity which she owes to her husband, the tenderness and care due to her children, are such natural and self-evident consequences of her position that she cannot honestly refuse her consent to the inner voice which is her guide, nor fail to discern her duty in her natural inclination (*Emile* 345).
From the role he ascribes to woman, Rousseau presumes a whole range of ‘natural’ qualities. All reflect the virtue which is appropriate to the domestic sphere. Women’s right is not to be free and equal but to win love and respect through obedience and fidelity. Pregnancy, nursing, childbearing, gaining the husband’s love, all conspire to fill her life. She has rights only so that she might perform her duties better.

Rousseau’s vision of socio-political regeneration in totality excludes women from the political schema. The domestic function allotted to women was actually a moral prerequisite for civic virtue in the male state. Rousseau’s political thinking doubted women’s rational qualifications for active political membership, by way of innate sexual disparity. As stated in *Emile*: “Although women do have reason, it is of a practical nature. Women lack the accuracy or attention for success in the sciences; she cannot appreciate genius. For, abstract and speculative truths, principles and axioms, generalizations as such, are beyond her grasp” (*Emile* 349).

Such an incapability of women in the political sphere is of obvious significance as it is required to discern the General Will. In order for the General Will to emerge, individuals must not only have reason but they must do so independently. But women cannot give the sort of consent needed in the polity. The lack of capacity to articulate, confinement in the home surely denies the breadth of vision which is needed to evaluate public issues. The characteristics ascribed to women rob them of the credentials for citizenship: they lack the right sort of reason, autonomy, judgment, sense of justice and ability to consent.

Besides, for Rousseau the “genuine mother of a family is no woman of the world, she is almost as much of a recluse as the nun in her convent” (*Emile*
She has her sights fixed on the well-being of her particular family, not on the world outside. She is not therefore predisposed to considerations of impersonal justice and Rousseau goes far as to suggest that this is a natural limitation: “Woman is made to submit to man and to endure even injustice at his hands. You will never bring young lad to this; their feelings rise in revolt against injustice; nature has not fitted them to put up with it” (Emile 359).

Rousseau concludes that men are strong and active, evincing power and will, while women are weak and passive, lacking resistance. As a result women cannot give the sort of consent needed in polity – or, what comes to the same thing; they are incapable of withdrawing consent and so making its granting meaningful. Almost not a single candidate opted for the General Will. Relatively it might be argued that it is their very feminine qualities, whether natural or acquired, that women are uniquely well-equipped for the sort of politics Rousseau envisaged.

Rousseau’s theory projects women as unsuited to the ideas of citizenship. Ideally, Rousseau believes that mutual dependence will limit the excesses of both sexes. Thus he describes the woman as the eye and the man the hands; they are so dependent on one another that the man teaches the woman what to see while she teaches him what to do. Rousseau’s preference for female seclusion in the home is firstly, to prevent women from their particular powers (women’s compassion and love) into the public realm, where they would be inappropriate. Additional concern is if her powers are unleashed outside of marriage they are destructive, infecting the masculine world, encouraging illicit relationships. Secondly, women must be kept out of public in order to safeguard their natural qualities. Thus, it is because women are associated through their relationship with a natural compassion, that they must be protected by confinement in the
domestic world, where they are awarded a crucial role in sustaining the sentiments which are required for civic virtue.

Without woman’s compassion, a regenerating social contract would remain inconceivable. This is perhaps why Rousseau places such great store on the strength of the original mother-child bond: “when mother deign to nurse their children, then will be a reform in morals; natural feeling will revive in every heart; there will be no lack of citizens for the state; this first step by itself will restore mutual affection” (Emile 13). Ironically, it is from their mothers that men first learn the sentiments necessary to patriotism, fraternity and discernment of the General Will.

As a retort the first voice in favor of women’s rights was in fact raised much earlier. The first major feminist manifesto A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792) was written by Mary Wollstonecraft, who demanded equal opportunities for women in the field of education, economics and politics. An attack on the social and economic systems, A Vindication strongly pleaded for women’s education and their protection by laws. In her introduction to A Vindication Wollstonecraft demands that women should be treated as human beings:

Dismissing, then, those pretty feminine phrases, which the men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence, and despising that weak elegancy of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manners, supposed to be the sexual characteristics of the weaker vessel, I wish to show that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex, and that secondary views should be brought to this simple touchstone.(82)

Wollstonecraft argues that the principles and attitudes which suggest that woman was created to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears
whenever, dismissing reasons, he chooses to be amused, must be repudiated before a real change in her condition could be gained permanently. She strongly condemns the religious attitude which is also responsible for giving secondary position to women. She regrets that “taught from their infancy that beauty is woman’s scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adore its prison” (131).

Thus A Vindication is the first document where the full humanity of women is asserted and the author insists upon its recognition.

Subsequently, in a groundbreaking critique of political contract theory, Carole Pateman developed the concept of the sexual contract to draw attention to the gendered nature of the social contract. Pateman claims that the social contract that generates liberal politics and establishes the political freedom of individuals simultaneously entails the sexual subordination of women in marriage. In her book, The Sexual Contract, (1988) Pateman aims to detail the consequences in Anglo-American societies of women’s exclusion from the category of ‘the individual’ or ‘the citizen’ and to show how patriarchal political right is ‘continuously renewed and reaffirmed through actual contracts in everybody life’. She emphasize: “The original pact is a sexual as well as a social contract; it is sexual in the sense of patriarchal – that is, the contract establishes men’s political right over women—and also sexual in the sense of establishing orderly access by men to women’s bodies” (Sexual 2).

Classical social contract theory has been fundamentally important in shaping politics as a discipline and in establishing its key areas of concern including notions of the individual and of citizenship. Pateman argues that political theorists have, though tended to reconstruct what were necessarily masculine citizens of the classic social contract texts into abstract, gender-
neutral individuals. In so doing, political theory has failed, to recognize men’s domination over woman as political and has omitted from the subject matter of politics such things as marriage, sexuality, and motherhood, domestic labor and sexual violence (Disorder 3). She argues that theorists talking about the social contract have ignored the sexual contract, which is the basis of women’s subordination. Both men’s freedom and women’s subjection, Pateman argues, are created through the original contract, with the resulting civil freedom being a masculine attribute depending on patriarchal right. Women, as universally are assumed to lack naturally the attributes and capacities of ‘individuals’ are denied the civil freedom.

Thus, in Pateman’s analysis of the classic texts of the social contract, it is only men who are held to possess the necessary capacities for civil citizenship; for they, unlike women, are individuals who can overcome their passions, exercise justice and uphold the law. In the classic contract, the contractual, social order drawn up by men is comprised of two spheres: one, the masculine, civil, public, political domain; and the other, feminine, private and removed from politics.

Yet, again in The Sexual Contract Pateman argues “The original (social-sexual) contract creates the modern social whole of patriarchal society. Men pass back and forth between the public and the private sphere and the writ of the law of male sex-right runs in both realms” (Sexual 12).

While the contract theorists challenged the paternal rights of fathers, they incorporated into their theories the patriarchal rights of husbands over wives. As a result they created a division not only between the state and civil society, but also between the public sphere of the civil freedom and the private sphere of the family. Women, Pateman tells, “are not party to the original contract through
which men transform their natural freedom into the social-sexual contract: security of civil freedom. Women are the subject of the contract” (Sexual 6; emphasis added). The public realm cannot be understood in isolation from the private realm, and yet there is a refusal to admit that marital domination is politically significant.

As a final point, patriarchy is specific to the pre-modern historical period. In the modern liberal state, according to Pateman, the system in transformed from patriarchy into fraternity. While in patriarchy the father or the king ruled over both men and women, in a fraternity the men get the right to rule over their women in the private domestic sphere; but agree on a contract of social order of equality among themselves within the public, political sphere. For this reason it subsist that sexual divisions of labor, power and dispositions are not biological but are socially constructed and women’s position need to be transformed towards sexual quality.

Down the years Feminist theorists, aiming to reveal the political significance of women’s oppression, have put forward the nature of the political in terms of power relations which cut across state, civil society and familial realms.

However, if feminism is indeed politics, it is politics in its broad conception as relations of power. As an “emancipatory movement which seeks to end a particular kind of power relationship”, Yeatman tells, “feminism is deeply concerned with issues of how power should be conceived and understood” (144). To define power is an enormously complex matter. Gender theorists have argued the power is gender-related in several distinct ways. Firstly, it is claimed that men and women do not have the same access to resources that are associated with power, and that men have power over women.
Secondly, it is held that men and women tend to understand power differently. Gender is here assumed to be “an ideological effect of the way power “conditions” the mind” (Gatens 127). With this general possessional approach to power there have of course been significantly distinct understandings as to the basis for men’s power over women.

Hence, it could be stated that in its most basic liberal political formulation, the concept of the public and the private portrays social relations as comprised of two, largely separate realms. The public realm is characterized by activities individuals undertake in wider society and in common with a multitude of others, such as engaging in paid work, and exercising political, democratic rights, under all jurisdiction of government and the state. In contrast, the private realm is characterized by activities undertaken with particular others, relatively free from the jurisdiction of the state. It is the realm of the household, of home and of personal or family relationships. In essence, the public/private dichotomy arises from its gendered nature, from the association of masculinity and the public and of femininity and the private.

However, the apparently binary division between public and private is complicated by the existence of a third sphere, also labeled private – that of personal life. This creates a tripartite, rather than a dual, division of social relations: the state, civil society and the personal. It is clear that the state is always cast as public. It is equally clear that the personal, when considered within political theory is cast as private. Confusingly, civil society is cast as private when opposed to the state and public when opposed to the personal. This inevitably makes any discussion of a single public/private dichotomy either partial or confused or them.
Sexual difference therefore signifies political difference, the difference between freedom and subjection. Feminists pointed out the arbitrary and false nature of the boundaries that had been drawn between the private and public spheres. They also rejected the conception of the political as located only within the institutional arena of government. They adopted the instrumentalist conception of politics as power and proceeded to extend the definition of power such that power was ubiquitous and politics all–encompassing.

Historically, it is men who have acted within the public realm and have moved freely between it and the private realm, while women have been mostly restricted to the private realm, and subjected to the authority of men within it. The feminist assertion that the *Personal is Political* issued a direct challenge to this public/private dichotomy; rather it destabilized all that had previously been presumed.

The notion *Personal is Political* questioned firstly, the traditional views on the family and personal life as outside the remit of ‘politics’, and arguing that the private sphere was in fact a primary site of power relations and gendered inequality.

Secondly, the assertion that the *Personal is Political* questioned two of the central features of most conventional articulations of the political: the nature of political power and the correlation between politics and the public sphere. The idea that politics is power, coupled with the adoption of an extensive heterogeneous conception of power, encouraged many feminists’ theorists to consider politics as largely indistinguishable from anything else. Such a contention led to a huge series of reflections on the politics of sexuality, reproduction, identity, housework, etc.
As a result a new definition of politics was formed, which include everyday struggle and power relations and also reclaimed women as politically active rather than a political. Thus, it also hints at the subordinated position of women in politics tied to gender as a system of power that affects the understanding, practice and study of politics.

Therefore, the essence of feminism lies in its re-evaluation of the persona and its insistence on the location of ‘politics of revolution’ within the minutiae of the everyday. Recovering the personal through explicating women’s everyday experiences should be recognized. The social world they presently inhabit is the one they conceptualize through a worldview provided by a sexist society and thoroughly andocentric social science. They need to reclaim, name rename their experiences and thus their knowledge of the social world that they live in. therefore there is a stress on “the personal” as “political” aspect.

**The Politics of Personal Life and Patriarchy:**

The concept of patriarchy along with the notion that the *Personal is Political*, has offered a fundamental challenge to traditional definitions of politics, even if a precise definition and location of the term has remained elusive. Together, these two conceptions have relocated significant political power as well as anticipating a new style of politics. Second Wave feminism is not just about the emergence of a new radical feminism but it also marks key sifts in the politics of liberal and Marxist feminist.

Kate Millett’s theory of *sexual politics* marked a grave sift from classic marxist principles to a consideration of how gendered relations could be entered into a class-based analysis of power. Kate Millett important feminist of the twentieth century, in her book *Sexual Politics* impressively lined up the historical argument for feminism that women ought to be given equal treatment
in society. She describes the relation between the sexes as basically political. It is an arrangement “whereby one group of person is controlled by another” (23). She argues that for the establishment of patriarchal society, the status accorded to women has been a demeaning one, that of the homemaker and chattel, and feels that all basic sexual difference are cultural in origin.

Private life was now the declared site of political relationships, not another dimension governed by an apolitical ethic. Kate Millett in *The Sexual Politics* justified the fusion by arguing that sexual relations were indeed political ones if politics referred to power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another. The book includes sympathetic discussion of Frederick Engels’s *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884). Engels believed that among primitive tribes, both men and women participated in occupations equally for the good of their community, but with the beginning of trade arose the concept of private property and the desire to bequeath it to one’s own sons. And this led to the subjugation of women, as woman because of her capacity to reproduce was considered a property.

Millett believes that patriarchy imposed strict fidelity and subservience on women. She also hopes for the times when the monogamous family will cease to exist and when the raising of offspring will be left to trained practitioners of both sexes, instead of parents. Millett condemns Freud’s theory of “penis envy” and his contribution to psychoanalytic thought, his attitude towards women in particular. Millett thinks that one of the aims of freeing women is to free them from “immemorial subordination” which in the process can bring us” a great deal closer to humanity.” (*Sexual* 36)
Throughout history, Millett argued, sexual relations have taken the form of dominance and subordination. Sex as remained a status category whereby one half of the population dominates the other. Patriarchy, thus, emerges as the pre- eminent political system, but it also decrees that the most intimate personal interaction assumes political form. Here, the political form means the realization that personal experiences were part of a richer fabric. Politics in this wider sense means ‘power’ or rather ‘power relations’: who does what to whom and in whose interests.

Since Feminist never argued that personal politics meant private suffering ameliorated by individual action. Literally, patriarchy means rule by the male head of a social unit, a family or tribe. The patriarch, typically a societal elder, has legitimate power over others in the social unit, including other men, all women and children. However, since the early twentieth century, feminist writers have used the concept to refer to the social system of masculine domination over women. Patriarchy is a central concept in Kate Millet’s *The Sexual Politics*, analyses the institution of the family, and is identified as a key means through which men’s domination is achieved.

Thus, Millet’s theory is based on the claim that unlike state activities, politics was no longer a specialized and circumscribed engagement and so, power is not confined to the public worlds of economic and political activity, it characterizes all relationships between sexes; including the most intimate. The further expanded motion of personal politics is that the politicization of personal experience meant that politics did not always include visible coercive institutions such as the state and the workplace. It establishes that all relations involving power are political.
Women are socialized in such a manner that asking for reasoned consent to a power which remains rarely invisible makes little sense. Millet points out that “patriarchy always gains (tacit) consent because it appears so natural” (Sexual 26). Psychoanalysis has shown that the unconscious, one’s very self-identity and personality, are structure by patriarchy and are thus sites for political struggle. No crevice of female existence seems to remain free from the tentacles of male power, and so every dimension is politicized.

The feminist claim *Personal is Political* eroded the traditional notion of politics. As feminist critics assert the new found realism of the *Personal is Political*, firstly locate the family and the sexual identities constituted there, rather than the state, as the primary site of power relations. As Claire Duchen, states “politics is about personal life not simply about electoral battles and ambitious individuals: that the way we live in our private lives is as much the stuff of politics as parliamentary debates or theories of state” (44). Second, they isolate men, rather than economic classes or self-interested individuals, as the prime power-seekers. Third, they find that power is exercised through a whole range of channels but tend to focus on psycho-cultural ones, since consciousness raising is needed before victims recognize the full scope of their oppression. Fourth, then the scope of politics is considerably broadened; it no longer makes sense to locate a circumscribed political arena and juxtapose it to an apolitical private realm. Thus, the style of politics which its personalization engenders is at odds with traditional practices.

According to the new found realism, the *Personal is Political*, the family is especially political. The concept of patriarchy resists any single definition. The notion of patriarchy in the seventeenth century denoted the power of the father over his household and when it was also used to legitimize monarchical claims to and absolute rule grounded in nature. Revived by feminists in the
early 1970s, the term has been associated with the ‘rule of the father’ as stated by Juliet Mitchell and Kate Millet’s classic formulation as ‘the rule of women by men’ or simply ‘men’s power over women’.

Juliet Mitchell in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1971) claims patriarchy as the law of the father. She claimed that patriarchy is inherited intergenerationally via the unconscious and that prior to capitalism; it was synonymous with civilization itself. Mitchell states the kinship rules. Embodied in kinship systems, the patriarchal law, the law of the father is learnt by each infant during the Oedipus complex. The child who learns to speak during the Oedipal phase is introduced into a symbolic order which structures its subjectivity in a way that is always masculine, since language is inherently phallocentric.

The alternative definition of patriarchy, as the rule of women by men generally, was given classic formulation by Kate Millett: “Male shall dominate female, elder male shall dominate younger” (*Sexual 25*).

For Millett, patriarchy meant a set of attitudes learnt afresh by each child as it was socialized first by the family and later by a range of other patriarchal institutions. Sex roles are allocated to males and females and the requisite gendered traits internalized. Millett argues that across every culture, every historical period, every mode of production, the subjugation of women by men is the primary political relationship. Men’s power, she states, goes deeper than the power based on class or race, and is universal and ubiquitous. A process of socialization, which begins in the family and is reinforced by education, literature and religion, maintains it; it also rests upon economic exploitation, state power and ultimately force, naked force. (*Sexual 36*)
Thus, radical feminist perspective gives theoretical priority to two systems—capitalism and patriarchy—in the explanation of patriarchy. The theories present patriarchy as a primarily psycho cultural phenomenon. At best, some sort of universal male will to power seems to be assumed. Feminist theory has subsequently become greatly preoccupied with precisely the question of how the biological male or female is transformed into a being with masculine and feminine traits that conform to the traditional active/passive dichotomies.

The concept of gender came into common parlance during the early 1970s. It was used as an analytical category to draw a line of demarcation between biological sex differences and the ways these are used to inform behaviors and competencies, which are then assigned as either ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’. The purpose of affirming a sex/gender distinction was to argue that the actual physical or mental effects of biological difference had been exaggerated to maintain a patriarchal system of power and to create a consciousness among women that they were naturally better suited to ‘domestic’ roles.

Even society distinguishes between women and men, while allowing for variations in the nature of the distinctions drawn, codes are created and relations between them are organized. The expected and necessary gender order is hierarchical, inequitable or oppressive. Women, by general tendency exhibit the psychological qualities ascribed to them, were there is no ‘natural’ foundation for it. They also collude in their gendered identification were it is against their interest and may even conflict with conscious desires.

Thus, patriarchal male-domination, according to radical feminists, is present across time and culture and exists in every sphere defining it as political.
Paternalistic Dominance: A System of Gender Domination

The term ‘gender’, as used within feminist theory, is a complex and contested concept that can best be understood as a category that was developed to explore what counts ‘woman’ and as ‘man’. The distinction between sex, a matter of biology and gender a set of culturally defined characteristics has been central to a significant body of gender studies to date. The terms male and female indicate one’s sex, a biological status. The terms masculine and feminine indicate one’s gender, the complex of socially constructed characteristics, which are held to relate to the two sexes. As Toril Moi notes, “it has long been established usage to make (‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’) represent social constructs (patterns of sexuality and behavior imposed by cultural and social norms), and to reserve “female” and “male” for the purely biological aspects of sexual difference” (Moi, 247).

However, it was Simone de Beauvoir who developed the theoretical framework for and account of the sex/gender distinction. Her claim that “one is not born, one becomes a woman” offered a sweeping critique of biological determinism. Simone de Beauvoir stresses the role of tradition and culture in conditioning women to adopt inferior roles: woman, she argues, is not natural; she is “a product elaborated by civilization”. (The Second Sex 10)

In 1953, the English translation of French writer Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le Deuxieme Sexe* (written in 1949) appeared which proved a major influence on the women liberation movement. Simone de Beauvoir a radical feminist belongs to the first generation of new feminists. In *The Second Sex* she draws heavily on the disciplines of biology, psychoanalysis, political economy, anthropology, philosophy and history. The chief argument of Simon de Beauvoir’s book is that in patriarchy women have been forced to occupy a
secondary position in relation to men, a position comparable in many respects to that of racial minorities in spite of the fact that they constitute at least one half of the human race.

Simone de Beauvoir believes that this secondary position is not imposed of necessity by natural “feminine” characteristics but rather by strong environmental forces of social traditions and education which have been under the control of men. This has resulted in the failure of women to take a place of human dignity as free and independent existents. This has not only limited their achievements in many fields but has also given rise to pervasive social evils and has had a particularly vitiating effect on the sexual relations between men and women. Man considers himself ‘Subject’ and ‘Absolute’ and ‘woman’ is the Other:

She is called “the sex,” by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less… she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other. (16)

Man always thinks that he is in the right, while woman is in the wrong; all the negative qualities are assigned to her. He is afraid of feminine competition. The position of women is changing steadily and they are beginning to take part in the affairs of the world also but it is “still a world that belongs to men” (21); the subjugation of women continues and thus “we are exhorted to be women, remain women, become women.” (13) Man’s function is living life, and his place is in the world and woman’s is in the home. She has been treated as a best of luxury (coquettes and courtesans), beasts of burden (harried housewives) or as the devil’s handmaiden. Man either sees her as a source of transcendence or projects his own guilt on her. Deliver her from the myth of the
Eternal Female and let her create herself, i.e. put woman in an existential perspective. She can transcend her subservient position only by having some activity of her own.

De Beauvoir analyzes the relationship between man and woman in terms of a subject-object or self-other model, according to which man’s subjectivity—his self-assertion as a free, autonomous and independent being—is, established only through opposition to and thus dependent upon, woman’s absolute and eternal otherness. De Beauvoir argues that to be an autonomous subject and the social requirement—often internalized as a personal desire—that she take up the role of other. As she states “The drama of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego) – who always regards the self as the essential – and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the inessential”. (16)

For de Beauvoir, woman’s lapse into being – for – others is typical of romantic love. In love, man reaffirms himself and his own “Sovereign Subjectivity” through experiencing and being recognized by another; woman does not reaffirm herself, but abandons herself to love, to the experience of loving and being loved. He remains and affirms himself; she is the other, self-less relative. The conflict and the fundamental incompatibility is at the roots, which leads for and account of the social and psychic origins of the two different senses of self in woman experiences which de Beauvoir so perceptively, describes as “the drama of woman”.

Lastly, it could be summed up that Simone de Beauvoir labeled woman’s tragic acceptance of her own otherness the feminine “mystery”, which continues from generation to generation through the painful socialization of woman into passive or feminine roles. What “mystery”? – de Beauvoir insisted that from the
beginning, girls recognize that their bodies are different from those of boys. With puberty, with the bodily changes that take place, girls are compelled to accept and internalize as shameful and inferior their otherness, which is ossified, said de Beauvoir, in the institutions of marriage and motherhood. As de Beauvoir saw it, the role of wife blocks women’s freedom. What is more, marriage enslaves women.

Women pay for their ‘happiness’ with their freedom. De Beauvoir insisted that this price is too high for anyone because the kind of contentment, tranquility, and security that marriage offers woman drains her soul of its capacity for greatness. After so many years of its publication, the book still continues to exercise a significant influence on the feminist literature.

An added milestone was the advent of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. However, in 1953 when the English translation of the book appeared, it did not initiate any movement as it happened in 1963 when the women’s government took the shape of a revolution with the publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*.

*The Feminine Mystique* took the American society by storm. Feminism as it now exists dates from the publication of this book, which had a tremendous impact on society. Based mainly on interviews with the Friedan’s classmates, fifteen years after graduation from a woman’s college, the book challenges the popular belief that a woman’s place is at her home and that she should find fulfillment in motherhood and domesticity, which had religiously been perpetuated all through the ages. Defining the “feminine mystique” or the “incommunicable quality”, she writes in the preface:
There was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform, the image that I came to call the feminine mystique. (9)

Most of the women whom Friedan interviewed were married, had comfortable homes, children and were blessed with all the comforts of life, yet they conformed to the image of Friedan’s “feminine mystique”. They had no purpose in their lives and were faithfully playing their role of devoted wife and loving mother and were supposed to seek fulfillment in it. But this in fact created a sense of “emptiness, non-existence and nothingness” (264) in them.

Friedan accuses society for not permitting women to gratify their basic needs of self-fulfillment to grow and fulfill their potential as human beings. Seeking an independent identity is considered only the male’s privilege. The core problem for women is not sex but identity which has always been denied to them. Friedan says that a woman can never ask questions like “Who am I? What do I want?” But now for the first time women are becoming aware of this identity crisis which began much earlier. Friedan also rejects Freud’s opinion about women that they can glory only in their own femininity.

Friedan finally declares that “for woman, as for man, the need for self-fulfillment-autonomy, self-realization, independence, individuality, self-actualization—is as important as the sexual need, with as serious consequences, when it is thwarted. Woman’s sexual problems are, in this sense, by-products of the suppression of her basic need to grow and fulfill her potentialities as a human being, potentialities which the mystique of feminine fulfillment ignores” (282). She further argues that a woman can find fulfillment only in a creative work of her own. Friedan, however, did not discard the institution of marriage as the militant feminists later did.
Other prominent feminist of the twentieth century are Kate Millett, Frederick Engel and Germaine Greer. There are certain differences in their ideological viewpoints, but again the aim is to liberate women from male oppression and to promote women’s rights.

In particular the second wave, feminism grew from the recognition that women must represent themselves, literally in political practice, and equally by contesting negative verbal and visual images of themselves. The feminists argued that the way women perceived themselves and were perceived was ineluctably shaped by the ways in which images of women were constructed and communicated to the population at large. When examining representations of women feminists have learned to look at what is absent as well as what is all too present.

The key activity of the feminist study of representation is the study of negative representations of women and femininity. Representation is important not least because the images of women reflected back to them may be objectionable, but also because they tell something about how women’s lives are values and the difficulties in being represented in the public sphere. As Margaret Marshment observes, “Representation is a political issue. Without the power to define our interests and to participate in the decisions that affect us, women like any other group in society will be subject to the definitions and decisions of others” (125).

**Misrepresentation** of women by men sustains and justifies women’s subordinate position. It rather reinforces dominant ideologies of gender difference and the qualities of ideal type femininity. This concern with women’s images is also found in Kate Millett’s classic *Sexual Politics* (1971). Kate Millett’s was one of the early ground breaking texts in feminist literary criticism.
in its work on the sexualized construction of women in novels by some of the key twentieth century male writers such as D. H. Lawrence and Henry Miller. As Millett states “Sexual politics obtains consent through the ‘socialization’ of both sexes to basic patriarchal politics with regard to temperament, role, and status. As to status, a pervasive assent to the prejudice of male superiority guarantees superior status in the male, inferior in the female” (Sexual 26)

Thus, Feminist literary criticism was to evaluate the ways in which women characters had been represented in past fiction by men and women, and how women writers might represent women in the future in order to give more positive role models for women readers. Male representation can read into femininity whatever qualities are needed to construct their sense of the masculine.

If gender is not determined by sex, but is a product of socialization, it becomes important from a structuralist approach to theorize the nature of the social structures at work. As Brittan in Masculinity and Power argues: “Gender is never simply an arrangement in which the roles of men and women are decided in a contingent and haphazard way. At any given moment gender will reflect the material interests of those who have power and those who do not.” (114). Gayle Rubin offered one of the first articulations of such a structuralist account of the sex/gender distinction, and the functioning of the gender system. The central claim of Rubin’s arguments was that the gender system which constructs two different sexes is a system that works to concentrate power in the hands of patriarchs (older men who control both younger men and women). The family is the significant site of power and heterosexuality is the central institutions that perpetuate the gender system.
Besides, diverse form of analysis generates an idea that women could therefore be viewed as a social class. Numerous theories emerged during the 1980s, each privileging a different aspect of social relations, as central to the construction of gendered identities. One of the most influential theses was that developed by Nancy Chodorow (1978). As Chodorow reflects:

In the early period of the contemporary feminist movement, feminists searched for a grand theory. This single cause, or dominant factor, theory would explain a sexual inequality, hierarchy, and domination that were omnipresent and that defined and circumscribed entirely the experience and organization of gender and sexuality (1).

Chodorow looked for a grand theory in psychological anthropology and developed a model of male and female self & gender identity. Chodorow’s central claim was that girls and boys develop different “relational capacities and senses of self as a result of growing up in a family in which women mother” (173). In this context boys develop “a sense of what it is to be masculine through identification with cultural images of masculinity and men chosen as masculine models” (176). Chodorow here claims to replace an oppositional view of development with a relational one.

Any feminist reading leads to a more inclusive approach to all aspects of gender – masculine as well as feminine. As Feminist scholars claim both masculine and feminine modes of behavior reflect social expectations. Men and women enact different roles because society expects them to act in these ways. The norms of masculinity and femininity demand certain sorts of behavior from men and women. Masculinity is the set of social practices and cultural representations associated with being a man.
The plural 'masculinities' is also used in recognition that ways of being a man and cultural representations of about men vary, both historically and culturally, between societies and between different groupings of men within any one society. The concept of masculinity is inherently relational. It only exists in contrast to femininity.

The idea that men and women are different did not exist until the 19th century and bourgeois ideology of separate spheres. Semiotic approaches define masculinity through a symbolic difference between masculinity is defined as that which is not feminine. This definition uses masculinity as the master signifier, the place of symbolic authority; femininity is defined by a lack. Masculinity only exists within a system of gender relations.

As stated earlier, it is now commonplace to recognize that gender is about relationships between women and men, it was not until the 1980s that these relationships became the more explicit object of study; and that the focus shifted women to their relationships with men, construction of patriarchy, dynamics of intra – household relations, and issues of power and subordination. In this tradition, it is now increasingly recognized that men, ideals of masculine behavior, and models of masculinity are central to an understanding of how gender inequalities emerge.

This gender bias transforms itself into a male-monopolized institution that is all-embracing and universal appropriating to treat women as passive spectators.
Gender, Feminism, & Politics in India: An Overview

Writers, philosophers and thinkers of all ages have made every effort to show that the subordinate position of women is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth. In ancient India, women’s lot was no better and they were assigned secondary roles in a male-dominated society by religious injunctions and social conventions. The ancient Hindu law-giver, Manu, whose philosophy occupies a significant place in the mainstream of Indian ideology and culture, does express some noble opinion about women:

Where females are honored, there the deities are pleased; but where they are dishonored, there all religious acts become fruitless. (Manusmriti, III, 56 68).

Yet, he too constantly stresses the inferiority of women to men. Manu starts with the fundamental principle that all through her existence woman must remain dependent on man:

In childhood must a female be dependent on her father; in youth; on her husband; her lord being dead, on her sons; if she has no sons, on the near kinsmen of her husband; if she be left no kinsmen, on those of her father; if she has no paternal kinsmen, on the sovereign; a woman must never seek independence. (V, 148)

Verses 14 and 15 of Chapter IX in Manusmriti depict women in general as licentious and grossly sensuous; the creator “implanted in them carnal passions, love for ornament, impure desires, wrath, dishonestly, malice and bad conduct.” (IX, 17) According to Manu, a wife must ever remain devoted to her husband and always please him while he is alive. After his death she should never think of any other man: “Even though the husband be of bad character and seeks pleasure elsewhere he must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife.” (V, 154) A vicious husband must be worshipped, but a bad wife may at any time be superseded (by another wife). (IX, 80) Elsewhere we read
that a wife who has committed faults may be beaten with a rope or a short bamboo. (VIII, 299) Though the widow is strictly enjoined to remain faithful to her husband’s memory, there is no corresponding duty on the part of the husband:” After having burnt a wife, who dies before him, the husband may marry again and again.” (V, 168)

Manu divides Indian society into four Varnas: “Brahmans”, “Kshatriyas”, “Vaishyas” and “Shudras”, and the position of women has been equated with the lowest class, Shudras, and like them women are denied various religious privileges. Thus, right in antiquity, double standards were set to determine the roles of men and women.

In an Indian patriarchal society, a female child is brought up under the strict control of her parents with the view that she is to given to a new master, her husband, who will determine and shape her for the rest of her life. The traditional feminine virtues and graces are instilled in her so that she could be an attractive commodity in the marriage market. She is groomed to be an object of sale right from her childhood. She gets hardly any encouragement to develop her independent individual self. The decision in terms of her career or even marriage is taken by her father, brother or mother. As Simone De Beauvoir observes in The Second Sex “Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society” (445).

Marriage is considered to be the greatest ambition of a girl. As such a woman is always someone’s daughter, someone’s wife or someone’s mother, minus her own identity. The feminists highly resent these culturally constructed norms which make women subjects of men in various forms. They do not deny the biological differences between a male and a female, but there is no reason to
presume, as men do, that these physical differences make them superior to women.

The patriarchal practices which reduce women’s status to inferior social beings are further perpetuated by myths and traditions which unfortunately have been embedded in the fabric of every society. According to V.A. Novarra, as states in “International Women’s Year 1975” the myth related to the role of women in Britain prescribes that “a mother should devote herself to providing a secure environment for her small children. A married woman cannot pursue a career which demands mobility. Works of art by women still have to be judged as “women’s work”. Membership of an all-male club or society can be prestigious: membership of a woman’s organization is a subject for facetious remarks”(317).

In India, states Akhileshwar Jha in his book *Modernization and the Hindu Socio-Culture* since woman is considered to be an “embodiment of sacrifice, silent, suffering, humility, faith and knowledge,”4 she should be virtuous, chaste, submissive, homely, graceful, and devoted to her husband and his family. She must seek pleasure in these relationships. The faintest of any such idea that every being “exists primarily for the realization of oneself can never occur to her in the wildest of her dreams” (95).

These attitudes exemplify the belief that woman should not have any right on her own; that she has only duties in relation to man. Hence, due to a designed patriarchal set up, women could have no role outside the home and incapable of exercising political judgment increasingly coexists. Although Feminists argue that if women are treated as autonomous, self-determining individuals rather than simply as daughters, wives and mothers to be owned controlled or protected by men, they can transcend the limitations of their womanly condition and lay claims to political rights on the same basis as men.
During the colonial rule in India, there was an awareness of the need of improvement in women’s condition, and the idea to impart education to women was revived. For this purpose several missionary schools and later girl’s colleges were opened in various parts of the country. Further, the birth of two movements, i.e. Social Reform Movement and Nationalist Movement during the nineteenth century, had deep impact on the status of women. The issues which attracted the attention of social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Dayanand Saraswati, Ishwar Chander Vidyasagar were Sati, ill-treatment of widows, illiteracy of women, etc. They thought that by giving women access to education and by enacting progressive legislation, social change could be initiated. They believed in reviving the old Vedic society which promised equal status to women.

Towards the last three decades of the nineteenth century the Indian outlook regarding the British began to change. The British were apprehensive about reforming the customs in the Indian society as they thought would destabilize their rule in India. Indians were growing disillusioned with the British rule and became doubtful of their intentions. This cynicism coupled with the growing impact of the liberal political ideology generated a desire for political freedom and self-rule, and gave birth to nationalist movement.

Nationalism separated the domain of culture into two spheres, the material and the spiritual. The claims of western civilization were the most powerful in the material sphere. The material/spiritual distinction was condensed to an analogue, but ideologically far more powerful, dichotomy. The home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility for protecting this quality. It posed concrete problems, both external and internal.
The nineteenth century was a period in which the rights and wrongs of women became major issues: if early attempts at reforming the conditions under which Indian women lived were largely conducted by men, by the late nineteenth century their wives, sisters, daughters, protégées and other affected by campaigns, such as that for women’s education, had themselves joined in movements. The Indian National Movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi led to further emancipation of Indian women in the twentieth century by involving them in the struggle for political freedom of the country. Gandhiji vehemently criticized the customs of child marriage, prohibition on widow remarriage, temple prostitution and the custom of purdah. He had deep faith in women’s inner strength and in his various Satyagraha movement’s vast numbers of women participated. Inspired and encouraged by men, a host of women also organized themselves under noted personalities like Pandita Ramabai, Ramabai Ranade and Anandibai Joshi for the betterment of their kind and to struggle against the heavy odds.

By the early twentieth century women’s own autonomous organizations began to be formed, and within a couple of decades, by the thirties and forties, a special category of ‘women’s activism’ was constructed. The formation of All India Women’s Conference in 1927 was a crucial event in this regard. The A.I.W.C. has been instrumental in bringing about some reforms like the Sharda Act (1929) banning child marriage, the Dissolution of the Muslim Marriage Act (1939) and the bill for better supervision of orphanages, rescue homes and marriage bureaus (1940).

‘Equality between the sexes’ was guaranteed by the Constitution of Independent India, and there was a comparative stillness in feminist activities until the nineteen-seventies, when the Constitutional promise of equality was denounced as sham. A spate of new women’s organizations was born and old
ones revitalized by the nineteen-eighties. The special category of ‘women’s activism’ was newly researched and expanded with a view to charting its specificities, as well as the ‘logical’ and organic links between feminism and Marxism, feminism and anti-communalism, feminism and anti-casteism, etc.

Nevertheless, the Women’s Liberation Movement in India, mainly functioning on the social and economic level, is largely concerned with issues like atrocities against women, wife-beating, rape, dowry-deaths, alcoholism, violence in the family, problems of working women, traffic in women, personal laws and health issues. Mostly campaigns for women’s circumstances were founded on liberal-democratic premise that it was both wrong and unfair that certain categories of human beings should be treated as inferior to other categories. The relationship between this premise, however, and the matter of gender difference was always an ambiguous one.

In the early years of movements for women’s rights, it was more or less taken for granted that the difference between the sexes was such that their roles, functions, aims and desires were different. And hence not only had they to be differently reared but differently treated in general. Over time this difference was itself adduced as a major reason for reforming women’s conditions. While early nineteenth century reformers argued that women’s difference from men was no reason for their subjection, later reformers argued that it was precisely this ‘difference’ which made women socially useful (women as mothers), and hence proper care for their conditions of being was socially necessary.

As women themselves joined campaigns, and also formed their own organizations, this point of difference, being a mother, was again stressed, but this time as an argument for women’s rights, to speech, education and emancipation. The terms, however, in which this argument was advanced, had
changed: from earlier functionalist emphasis on rationalizing the family to the creation of an archetypal mother figure, evoking deep, images through the use of metaphor and symbol.

As historians claim the first half of the twentieth century saw a symbolic use of the mother as a rallying device, from feminist assertions of women’s power as mothers of the nation, to radical invocations of the protective and ravening mother goddess, to the Gandhian lauding of the spirit of endurance and suffering embodied in the mother. As a matter of fact because of his self-feminization and his feminization of politics, Gandhi was hailed as the parent of the ‘Indian women’s Movement’, and his depiction of women’s innate qualities was eagerly received by many feminists as expanding and detailing many of their self-definitions.

Despite this, Gandhi’s view of the relationship between the sexes was neither fully nor widely accepted by feminist: while to him the sexes were different and complementary. When it came to the sphere of rights, feminist demands for parity with men, in property rights, to suffrage and education, cut across the affirmation of gender-based difference, for these said that in these spheres at any rate men and women were equal, or the same. To this extent pre-Independence feminists clung with one hand to gender-based definitions of themselves while reaching with the other for an existence based on equality and sameness rather than complementarity and difference.

In the post-independent India the contemporary feminist movement began by basing itself firmly on principles of equality and asserting that gender-based structures such as the sexual division of labor, oppressed and subordinated women. Feminist class-consciousness in the nineteen seventies was accompanied by a heightened awareness of the innumerable inequalities in India,
both between men and women and between women themselves, which stemmed from a series of different power structures, feeding into each other, based on caste, tribe, language, religion, region etc., as well as class.

Consequently, from the early nineteenth century definitions of the suffering of Indian women and the need for reform, by the early twentieth century the emphasis had shifted to stressing women’s right to be treated as useful members of society, and by the late twentieth century to demanding that women should have the power to decide their own lives.

The record of Indian women in politics is often cited in exclusion to accounts and records that dwell on the subordination of women. Indian women can vote and stand for election to all provincial and central bodies. Women have been ministers, ambassadors and, most notably, the Prime Minister.

Political theorists declare, while the extent of women’s involvement in Indian politics falls far short of the equality promised by the Constitution it is significant in comparison with other countries of the world. India’s record of women in politics is impressive. However, it is not remarkable from a historical perspective. Mainly, the politics of agitation brought women into all facets of the freedom movement where they demonstrated their bravery. Following Independence these women found it difficult to make the transition from agitation politics to electoral politics.

The reasons are: firstly, there has been the problem of party backing. The political parties all give lip service to the ideal of women in politics but have been reluctant to gamble with seats. Secondly, women candidates have disliked the rough and tumble of political life. Thirdly, the problem women in politics
face as stated by Rajeswari Sunder Rajan are related to their representation as both “feminine” and “unfeminine” (115).

Still, what is commendable is the striking number of women who have held responsible positions. As Geraldine Forbes analyses the Indian women in politics. For example, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur became the Union Health Minister in 1947; Renuka Ray was West Bengal’s Minister for Relief and Rehabilitation; and Sucheta Kriplani was general secretary for the Congress in 1959, Labor Minister in the Uttar Pradesh cabinet in 1962, and Chief Minister of United Province from 1963 to 1967. Vijayalakshmi Pandit was appointed Uttar Pradesh Minister for Health and Local Self-Government in 1937 and following Independence was selected as a delegate to the United Nations. In 1947 she was appointed ambassador to the then USSR and in 1949 ambassador to the USA. In 1953 she was elected president of the United Nations Assembly. This is only a short list of the women who have wielded power and influence in post-Independence India. (Geraldine Forbes 231)

The political scientist Mary Katzenstein as stated in “Toward Equality? Cause and Consequence of the Political Prominence of Women in India” 1978, has summed up the prominence of Indian women in politics as “the Mrs. Gandhi anomaly”. According to Katzenstein, political factors, especially the mobilization of women during the struggle for independence and Gandhian ideology, as well as the importance of kinship, have combined to create opportunities for women to move into leadership positions. (Mary 483)

Feminist critics and political historian have started raising serious issues: have the women in positions of political power been effective? What the Prime Minister’s gender meant to the country? Historical studies, books on women in contemporary India have either ignored the fact that India had a woman holding
the most important political office. It is interesting that in *Towards Equality: report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India* is one such document, which was able to establish the size and the significance of gender gaps in post-independence India. The only reference to the Prime Minister’s gender was included in two general sentences about women in politics in *Towards Equality* states:

> Though only a very few women were able to reach the highest level of power and authority, those who did so were recognized for their administrative skills and capacity to manage their affairs. Since 1952 there have been 13 women ministers in the Union Government—6 of them Deputy Ministers, 5 became Ministers of States. One attained Cabinet rank and the other Prime Minister—a position which she has retained since 1966. (297)

How should one understand the elevation of a number of Indian women to prominent positions and what does this mean for women in India? In “Woman Versus Womanliness: An Essay in Speculative Psychology” (1976), Ashish Nandy argues about the inconsistency between highly placed political women and the status of the masses of Indian women “[the] commonplace paradox of every social interpretation of the Indian woman” (158). He explains women’s political and scientific success in terms of the culture’s non-gendering of aggressive and activist traits. This hypothesis, with its focus on culture, is akin to those which articulate the culture/symbolic linkage between ‘shakti’ and the feminine.

Irrefutably, as the political theorist claim women in political positions are highly visual and may serve as models of empowered women. But if the question is whether or not woman can be effective politicians then the optimistic answer is ‘yes’, but still the degree of success would be ascertained by examining individual careers; as biographical case studies. Earlier women were excluded from the public realm. Once women were included in and
granted access to history, they redefined importance in terms of experience. Interestingly, their experience due to their placement in the private was different from the conventional story, which recounted a life of success rooted in the public world.

The image of woman has undergone changes in keeping with the changing social image of the society. One of the impacts of the Western contact, particularly on the urban Indian woman is the emergence of the New Woman who wants to break away from the old order or the orthodoxies that interfere and hinder her independent existence as an individual. But women who enter into the male-dominated trade and profession are faced into the problem of fitting into a male occupational culture. This presents them with a double mind. First is to take men in their own terms and thereby get denied their femininity and diminish their private status as women. Otherwise, as second stand is to assert their femininity and risk being labeled as inferior and inadequate. The fear of a threat to femininity through successful achievement is the result of cultural learning. The urban woman tends to deviate from the traditional pattern seeking her identity. At the same time she is caught in the conflict of whether or not to break her confines.

To, sum up, the maxim the ‘Personal is Political’ states that the personal relations must be understood as having political implications. That the inevitable conflicts between human beings must be understood in the context of a larger political pattern that advantages men over women. Women’s personal unhappiness has political or social roots. That, no private institution including the family has the right to oppress or abuse the woman. Women’s confession in public about their experience, i.e., the everyday experience of women’s sexuality, family, private relationships, body, and the home is a sign of power.
As times changed the meaning was slowly turned upside down to mean that the political, the social, the economic, and the cultural derive from our personal choices. All political phenomena arise from the accumulated personal choices of individual. Even public and political issues are women’s issues. Women’s experience, women’s wisdom, should challenge and transform the very discriminatory and violent politics that we are surrounded with. One of the major angles of my research is to examine to see the auto/biographer’s intentions in projecting this particular aspect of ‘personal intensity of expression’.

A close examination and association of Nehru women’s auto/biography brings forth the control of patriarchal power; patriarchal male-domination, present across time and culture and exists in every sphere defining it as political. Within the framework of the contention Personal is Political, the study substantiates that being women, Nehru women and their confinement to the social order that restricted them, made it difficult for them to transform their private ambition into public record, a difficult task for ‘woman’ in particular. As a result, it acknowledges the maxim Personal is Political.

The study of auto/biographies reflects culture. They are viewed as valuable sources for understanding the emergence of a modern sense of self, of individualization and self-consciousness as opposed to collective identity. In the milieu of India, auto/biographies enable us to render more intelligible the complex of forces at work in modern societies. The auto/biographies reflect on many of the major themes of gender, modernity, colonization and nationalism, religion, social change, family and kinship and inter-relationality between self and society that dominate the subcontinent. Scholars are of the opinion that as a cultural category, the biographical forms reveal insights not just into the experiences and attitudes of the individuals directly concerned, but also of the
wider society, or social segment, of which they are a part. This is of particular value in seeking to understand and analyze groups that are socially marginalized; not normally heard, such as women and marginal’s.

A comprehensive reading of Nehru women auto/biographies, as to be discussed in the forthcoming chapters, endorse the multi-dimensionality of women’s socially conditioned roles, a pattern of diffusion and diversity, when they write auto/biographies.
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