Chapter 1

Introduction: The Politics of Gender

It is only in recent times that the concept and nomenclature "gender politics" has made its way into the critical realm even though the power relationship between the sexes has been in discussion for long. Women in general are excluded from positions of power and dominance and are subjugated to men. Such a system founded on inequality has apparently been sanctioned and approved by society since domination is a premise of patriarchy. Simone de Beauvoir maintains that women have been relegated to the status of "the second sex" and reduced to objects for men since the dawn of history. In her seminal work of that title --The Second Sex-- she has asserted that woman has been constructed as man's other and that as such, she is denied the right to her own subjectivity. Kate Millett who popularized the term "sexual politics" through her powerful polemic has thrown light on the unbalanced relationship of dominance and subordinance that has prevailed between the sexes throughout history and continues to exist even at present. As she points out, through this system a most ingenious form of "interior colonization" has been devised.

Some intellectuals among men too have perceived the unequal relationship that exists between the sexes. Jean Genet, for example, has pointed out that "the fundamental human connection of sexuality" is "hopelessly tainted" in itself and refers to it as "the very prototype of institutionalized inequality" (qtd. in Millett 27). He is convinced that this division of humanity into two groups of which one is appointed to rule over the other by virtue of birth entails a system of oppression established and endorsed in the social order. Genet, being aware of the consequences of this fundamental division, has
cautioned that this system will "underlie and corrupt all other human relationships as well as every area of thought and experience" (Millett 27).

Claude Levi-Strauss is another scholar who commented on the extraordinary nature of the relationship of difference between man and woman in male-dominated society. He points out that "even before slavery or class domination existed, men built an approach to women that would serve one day to introduce differences among us all" (qtd. in Rich, OLSS 84).

Even though the fact of the dominance of one sex over the other has been accepted for long, a probe into the historical factors that contributed to such a state of affairs was made only much later. As a result of prolonged and persistent investigation conducted by determined activists, much light has been thrown on the 'difference' that exists between the male and female members of the human species. It has been found that behind the empirical notions regarding differences a number of fallacious impressions and beliefs exist which may be traced back in history. All the so-called authorities who are invariably men seem to have raised their voice with an end to silencing women and relegating them to subjugated positions. No less a philosopher than Aristotle held the view that the female is a "mutilated male," without an immortal soul; he even affirmed that women had lesser teeth than men. He asserted that the male is born to rule the inferior female. Rousseau dedicated woman to husband and to maternity and declared that she was made just for the purpose of yielding to man and to put up with his injustice.

Religion and politics have always catered to the interests of the dominant masculine group to perpetuate the notion of feminine subjugation. No matter to which religion a woman may belong, she is denied opportunities for growth and the development of her selfhood and is excluded from many spheres of life.
In the Christian ethics woman was always the temptress and in the interests of society it was considered best to curtail her opportunities. W.E.H. Lecky’s *History of European Morals* bears testimony to this:

Woman was represented as the door of hell, as the mother of all human ills. She should be ashamed at the very thought that she is a woman. She should live in continual penance, on account of the curses she has brought upon the world. She should be ashamed of her dress, for it is the memorial of her fall. She should be especially ashamed of her beauty, for it is the most potent instrument of the daemon. . . . Women were even forbidden by a provincial Council, in the sixth century, on account of their impurity, to receive the Eucharist into their naked hands. Their essentially subordinate position was continually maintained. (qtd. in Russell 35)

In Christian churches women’s freedom of speech is curtailed. This is in keeping with the dictum of St. Paul who exhorts woman to keep silent in churches, for, as he insists "they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says" (1 Cor. 14:34). Thomas Aquinas defines woman as "a misbegotten male" and the Catholic law which decrees that women are "unfit matter" for ordination still reflects this view. Muslim women enjoy very little freedom of movement and are even forbidden to enter mosques. Some sects still insist on women wearing purdahs when they appear before strangers or move out of their homes. Judaism which delegates quasi-priestly authority to the male parent curses the man who teaches his daughter the Torah. According to Sir Henry Maine, in the Roman patriarchal family, the eldest male parent is absolutely supreme in his household. His dominion extends to life and death and is as unqualified over his children and their houses.
as over his slaves (qtd. in Millett 46).

De Beauvoir records that during the Revolution women in France enjoyed more freedom than women of other countries. But unfortunately for the French woman, her status was decided and her lot fixed for a century during the dictatorship of Napoleon and this had the effect of retarding her emancipation. Radical differences between male and female were 'recognized' and woman was declared "made for the family." Femininity was considered as a kind of "prolonged infancy" (Second Sex 142).

The words of Balzac may be taken to be representative of the attitude of the anti-feminist middle class of France during the nineteenth century: "The destiny of woman and her sole glory are to make beat the hearts of men... She is a chattel and properly speaking only a subsidiary to man." He exhorts husbands to keep a firm reign, deny their wives education and keep them as unattractive as possible. According to him, the married woman is "a slave whom one must be able to set on a throne." The wife must be yielded to in trifles, given first place, relieved of painful tasks and cares but should be kept away from responsibility. De Beauvoir narrates how this proved to be disastrous for the middle class woman:

Most bourgeois women accepted this gilded confinement and the few who complained were unheard... The middle class woman clung to her chains, because she clung to the privileges of her class. Freed from the male, she would have to work for a living; she felt no solidarity with working-women... (Second Sex 142).

In primitive Indian society women enjoyed a relatively high status. As mother she was invested with power, respect and veneration. It was the tribe
that owned property and woman's work in the household was considered on a par with that of the man outside the house. However, around 1000 BC, with the rise of private property and commodity production the primary incapacitation of woman was brought about which led to her loss of status and eventual oppression by man (Tharakan and Tharakan 118).

Around this time the Aryans had established their supremacy over the non-Aryan races and succeeded in securing their services on a master-slave basis with the underpinning of the caste system which was emerging at that time. The polygamic tendencies of the Aryan male which resulted in introducing women of the so-called 'inferior' tribes as slaves, concubines or even as wives into the household brought about further decline in the status of the Aryan woman (Tharakan and Tharakan 118).

The practice of the early marriage of girls became very common by the epic period and this curbed the opportunity for education for them. A more tragic disaster brought about by the early marriage system was that the high rate of child mortality which prevailed in those days led to many girls becoming widows even before they reached puberty. The treatment meted out to widows was harsh and ruthless. They were more or less excommunicated from the rites and rituals and there prevailed many taboos against them. The concept of female chastity became deep-rooted in the Indian minds at about this time. Regarding personal morality, the society maintained a double standard for women and men. Manu's precept exhorted woman to be subject "to her father in childhood, to her husband in youth and to her sons on the death of her lord." According to the code of Manu, a woman's business is "to tend her husband and worship him as god" (Tharakan and Tharakan 119).
For many centuries there has been a tacit acceptance of a number of such assumptions about the inferior status of woman which pervade all fields of life. As Toril Moi observes, it is quite natural to assume that women have internalized this objectified vision about themselves and consequently they live in a state of inauthenticity (92).

Feminists contend that in a male supremacist world owned and controlled by men, it is no wonder that women consistently find themselves in subjugating positions. As has been shown by statistics ninety-nine percent of the world's resources are owned by men (Spender, Man Made 1). Since each and every avenue of power within society is in male hands, it cannot but be without some impact of its own since the essence of politics is power. It is quite natural that the ability to influence the thoughts and actions of the subjugated group goes hand in hand with dominance and power. Man's power to dominate, tyrannize, choose or reject woman" endows him with a "charisma" which comes "purely from his power over woman and his control of the world by force" and "not from anything fertile or life giving in him" (Rich, "When We Dead Awaken" 91). It is possible to define this masculine world adapting the words of Abraham Lincoln: "It is of the males, for the males and by the males!" Feminists maintain that the acquisition of political power is absolutely essential in order to secure equality with men.

The concept of "power" is highly charged for women. The delimiting aspect of power in its usual sense is that it has long been associated with violence and the use of force. Power is seen to act only in its own interest and by exploiting the powerless, including women and children. As Rich maintains the concept of power has long been associated with "the use of force, with rape, with the stockpiling of weapons, with the ruthless accrual of wealth and the
Feminists consider it important to re-define the very concept of power. To them power means "the capacity to change -- the individual and the environment -- without the use of force" (Boneparth xiv). Feminists, as a rule, are not interested in exploitative power, but in power that is mutually strengthening and fortifying. Human relationships and structures, when subjected to a total transformation, would result in the sharing of power in the form of knowledge, expertise, decision-making and access to the multifarious fields of life according to the feminist concept. This re-definition of power comes very close to the theories formulated by Foucault regarding the nexus between power, knowledge and truth. His contention is that power operates by producing truth itself. Every society, through various mechanisms, distinguishes between true and false statements and develops a type of discourse accepted as a "regime of truth" by it (131). Thus "truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it" (133). Thus he maintains that power and knowledge are joined together in discourse.

Gramsci showed how power works through the consent of the oppressed through a whole range of ideology-ridden culture. He introduced the notion of domination through the concept of hegemony and showed that power operates through the consent of the dominated (qtd. in Akerkar 3). Gramsci's theory provides a plausible explanation for the seemingly contented lives led by women in patriarchal society, without even realizing that they are leading a marginal existence.

An awareness regarding the unjust and unfair treatment meted out to women which forced them to lead subjugated lives had set in long before
formal inauguration of the women's movement (Millett 113). Consequently, a movement which aimed at the social, educational and political equality of women with men originated during the late eighteenth century. However, the official inauguration of the women's movement took place with the Seneca Falls convention in America in 1848. The activists of that time were keen enough to perceive that woman's sphere of action was decided and assigned by man and that she was denied the chance to exercise her own discrimination and decision-making ability. The prevalent conditions in patriarchal societies that held women in bondage were summed up by the convention as woman's grievances against man.

The liberation movement had strong supporters among men. In 1853 Rev. Theodore Parker made the famous declaration in Boston: "To make one half of the human race consume its energies in the functions of housekeeper, wife and mother is a monstrous waste of the most precious material God ever made" (qtd. in Friedan, 85).

Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott and other activists who led the suffragette movement were the focal points of feminist rebellion during the last years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century. They were awakened to the realization that their own condition was no better than that of the slaves and the depressed classes who were badly in need of liberation. The movement gathered momentum, became a predominantly political movement and succeeded in achieving suffrage for women in 1920.

America was in the grip of political turmoil in the 1960s. University students and women actively participated in the struggles to liberate the blacks.
and in the protests against the war in Vietnam. It has even been suggested that the re-birth of feminism was partly the result of student movements (Gatlin 89-90). The experience and confidence gained by young women who were active in these movements played a decisive role in raising feminist consciousness. Women of African-American origin, too, played a limited though significant role in the feminist movement. As a cumulative effect of all these factors, organized feminist movement became a reality in 1966 with the formation of the National Organization for Women.

There was a veritable explosion of books and pamphlets which aimed at inspiring women to fight against oppression. Betty Friedan’s classic work *The Feminine Mystique* has been held as the manifesto of the movement. Friedan exhorted the American women to emerge from biological existence in order to realize their individual selfhood. In America Kate Millett’s pioneering text of contemporary feminism *The Sexual Politics* and in Britain Germaine Greer’s work *The Female Eunuch* had far-reaching effect in consciousness raising. In France Simone de Beauvoir emerged as a seminal figure with the re-publication of her classic work *The Second Sex* which "pioneered ideas and techniques acknowledged by feminists from across the range of academic disciplines" (Humm, *Feminist Criticism* 24).

The resurgence of feminism in the second half of the twentieth century has developed into the most significant liberation movement of the world. Originating in the United States, it has spread like wild forest fire to all parts of the world, assuming global significance.

In India where the oppression of women was perhaps more severe than in other countries, not until the nineteenth century was there a move towards
abolishing the unjust practices and evil traditions. Since the majority of women were leading 'muted' lives, the move for reform was made by the men. Indian reformers of the period like Mahadev Govind Ranade and Raja Ram Mohan Roy pleaded for the spread of women's education. A campaign against early marriages gained wide support. The evil practice of 'sati' was declared illegal by the government.

The cause of equality of women was taken up by the national freedom movement. Mahatma Gandhi was an ardent champion of women's rights. The cause of the nation's freedom drew many brilliant women out of their houses and led them to join the freedom struggle and fight on a par with the men. With the participation of the Indian woman in the freedom struggle, the woman's question acquired a new dimension in India. By proving her mettle as a freedom fighter, the Indian woman proved that her sphere need not be confined to the household chores. Participation in these movements gave the women an awareness about their inherent power.

Women's groups formed by the mass organizations such as the Indian National Congress which is based on secularism and democracy, the Indian Communist movement, the dalit movements and the adivasi movements have taken up specifically gender issues such as domestic violence, property rights, land rights, and inheritance rights. Many of the autonomous women's groups have taken up the issues of violence against women. The existence of different groups and various mass movements in which women get involved indicates that different perceptions on women's oppression and on the ways to overcome them prevail in India. Since the oppression of women in the Indian context is based on a multiplicity of factors like class, caste and ethnicity, the need for a plural expression of feminism is imperative. It is practically difficult to
conceive of a single women's movement which can include within its fold all the complex issues faced by the women of India who belong to different groups and communities.

Ilina Sen, an activist associated with women's movement gives a vivid description of its nature in contemporary India. She writes about the functioning of the movement during the seventies and the eighties:

The last two decades have seen a conscious articulation of women's issues among many urban and educated middle class groups. . . . Many women from educated backgrounds have come together in groups in a realisation of their strength and potential and have lobbied and protested against the blatant forms of discrimination they face in our society. . . Structuraly, such groups are closer to the feminist groups of the west and this has facilitated their integration into international feminist circuits. . . (1-2).

The late seventies and early eighties are said to be explosive times for the women's movement in India (Tharu xix). Thus the resurgence of feminism as a socio-political movement is still continuing, bringing about decisive changes in the developed countries and making its impact, though in a lesser degree, in the developing countries of the world too. Since then feminism has become more of an international movement with increasing contacts between activists and sympathizers the world over. And once the consciousness of women was raised, they started to think in terms of exploitation to which they were subjected even within their family in their everyday life which was of immediate relevance to them as individuals and not in terms of world-wide
"economic exploitation, militarism, colonialism and imperialism" which had no direct bearing on their lives (Rich, "BBPLP" 535). It became apparent to the activists that an analysis of the power relationships between men and women was essential to put an end to the oppression of women (Jones 369).

In the 1960s, the politics of gender entered a new phase and the slogan "the personal is political" was adopted by feminists. The consciousness-raising campaigns conducted by feminists sensitized women regarding the exploitation "within the family, in marriage, in childrearing. . ." (Rich, "BBPLP" 535). Such an awareness resulted in breaking the mental barrier which separated the private from the public. Adrienne Rich reflects how she was drawn to the liberation movement by this slogan, "the personal is political." She has recorded how she felt the compulsion to bring together the outer world of politics and the private world of one's own, including male-female relationships even before she named herself a feminist. It is quite significant that more than three decades ago the term 'politics' was extended to sexuality, the body and emotions which were treated as 'personal' until then (Humm, Feminisms 3). In fact the feminists were the first to perceive the not so obvious connection between the personal and political realms.

It is possible to trace three definite stages in the evolution of this theory. In the first stage, political action changed the individual involved. The person gained a new strength by connecting herself/himself with a larger community and it opened up a new perspective in the individual's relationship to history and society. Those who were active in the Civil Rights Movement, Blacks as well as Whites, felt that their political involvement changed them and empowered them as individuals against the backdrop of a larger community. The feminist writer, Alice Walker voiced the feelings of the activists of the
time when she wrote in 1967, "It has been like being born again, literally" (551).

The second stage was marked by an awareness that personal feelings like hope, frustration and anger are legitimate motives for political involvement. At a later stage these feelings were integrated into political history and practice. In other words, politics became subjective and at the same time objective. The older radicals failed to see the youthful emphasis on personal feelings as political. This was in a way the difference between the older radicals in the woman's movement and those who belonged to the new left. The former, as a rule, subordinated personal feelings to the 'greater cause'. Women belonging to the new left gave priority to personal fulfilment. C.Wright Mills in *The Sociological Imagination* provided a theoretical basis for linking the personal with the political. In order to end the split between individual life and social institutions he insisted that politics should be rooted in personal life. This would necessitate political structures to give utmost importance to the welfare of individuals. Politics would cease to demand the sacrifice of individual lives for the sake of a 'greater cause'; on the other hand, it would lead to the minimization of individual alienation and the increase of political democracy (188).

A widening of the parameters of 'the political' marked the third phase of the theory. Politics was located not only in government and workplaces, but also in the most private areas of life. The new left and especially the Counterculture paid increased attention to these 'private' areas such as sexual relationships, leisure and physical appearance. The Port Huron Statement (1962) which fully articulated "the personal is political " emphasized humanism, individualism and community as a corrective to politics as it was
practised at that time. A need to change human relationships was also stressed. There was a realization that inter-personal relationships should become more meaningful and reach "beyond partial and fragmentary bonds such as worker to worker, employer to employee, teacher to student, American to Russian" (Gatlin 90).

In the Port Huron Statement there is a definite demand for participatory democracy, which should aim at bringing people "out of isolation and into community, and thus be a means of finding meaning in personal life". The political order is expected to "connect people to knowledge and to power rather than prevent individuals from acquiring them, so that private problems -- from bad recreation facilities to personal alienation -- are formulated as general issues" (Gatlin 90).

Women who actively participated in the struggles to liberate the blacks and in the protests against the war in Vietnam in the 1960s did not feel initially that they themselves were oppressed. Many of them were educated, middle and upper-middle class women who enjoyed privileges of their own. Besides, being part of the movement, opportunities for personal and political growth were available to them. The experience and confidence gained by young women who were active in these movements played a decisive role in raising feminist consciousness. Gradually they became conscious that their own status was no better than that of the depressed classes and that they themselves were badly in need of liberation. In 1967 a group of activists in the United States claimed that they were in a colonial relationship to men and that they recognized themselves as part of the Third World. They indicted the family as a unit for perpetuating "the traditional role of women and the autocratic and paternalistic role of men." One of the demands made by them
was that every adult person living in the household should assume an equal share of housework.

A number of conventions and conferences on women's issues were held in which women in large numbers participated with enthusiasm. They had acquired experience in organizing demonstrations and conducting campaigns as a result of several years of movement activity. Women got into the habit of meeting in small groups of their own and discussing their problems. They set out to create a politics on the basis of their personal experiences as soon as they realized the complexity of their problems. The common problems of subjugation that they endured could not be solved by reforming individual men; it was the system of male authority they had to fight with.

It has often been suggested that the articulate opposition offered by the feminist movement to male-dominated society has remained a formless resistance. In fact feminism exists in multiple forms. The various interests of women which motivate them to organize into groups become enmeshed in different socio-political concerns. These varied political and cultural traditions have led to the existence of a plurality of discursive forms of feminism. However, the lack of a central organization and the absence of a uniform theoretical basis have often been pointed out as the drawbacks of the feminist movement.

From the late 1960s the women's movement has been composed of three main schools: liberal, socialist and radical. Liberal feminists differ from socialists and radicals in their willingness to work within the existing social, political and economic systems. They demand an integrated society in which women are not relegated to the domestic periphery. Socialist feminists have
concentrated on analyzing the oppression of women within the historically specific context of advanced capitalism. Radical feminists hold the patriarchy rather than the capitalistic society responsible for the subjugated position of woman at home and in society at large. According to them the most effective way to attack patriarchy would be to rebel against the individual family unit which is at the core of patriarchy. The radicals want to make a clear break with male thought system and develop a woman-centred theory and practice. Millett’s *Sexual Politics* and Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* provide a framework for radical feminist theories of patriarchy. While Millett asserts that most of the distinctions between the sexes are cultural, Firestone, applying the principles of dialectical materialism to the situation of women in a patriarchal society affirms that women are the original exploited class. Feminists contend that the power relationships between men and women are of political value and that a systematic analysis of such power bonds is essential in order to take effective steps against the oppression to which women have been subjected for ages (Jones 369). The need to develop a theory and a politics that would make possible women’s liberation from this oppression was keenly recognized by feminists like Firestone, de Beauvoir, Rich, Juliet Mitchell, Michele Barrett, Monique Wittig and others.

In probing the broad question of how and why women came to be subordinated and oppressed in established societies, a number of major theoretical debates were focused on Marxism. Socialist or Marxist feminists attempted to incorporate feminism into a Marxist criticism of capitalism. Their thesis is that women’s oppression can be viewed as functional for capitalism in two ways -- one, women provide a cheap source of labour-power; and two, their domestic labour serves to reproduce the labour-power of the male-worker.
(Jackson 4). However, certain questions about gender politics are left unanswered since Marx had not made any overt remarks about this particular realm. Besides as Stevi Jackson points out, the subordination of women can hardly be attributed to capitalism since this phenomenon is seen to predate capitalism.

However, Friedrich Engels, the first person to attempt a historical explanation of the dialectical relationship between men and women, called the oppression of women the first class oppression. He explains how prosperity and development for men was won through the misery and frustration of women. Regarding the politics of time and class domination Marx writes how spare time is acquired for one class by converting the whole life time of the masses into labour time in a capitalist society. Using marxism as a metatheory, it is possible to derive the feminist antithesis: "In a patriarchal society, spare time is acquired for one gender by converting the whole life time of women into labour time" (Rose 164).

It is indeed strange that even though numerically women are not a minority in society, more than half the global population being constituted by them, they have been treated as marginal. Incidentally, women's lives, experiences and values have been assumed to be of secondary importance consequent to which masculine values and experiences are accepted as the determining norm. Marginality has been observed to be a cause of status dilemma experienced by oppressed classes in general. As in the case of women, other oppressed classes like blacks or second generation Americans very often face the situation in which the rewards of their efforts are withheld from them on the grounds of their origins (Millett 80). As de Beauvoir points out the predicament of a woman in a patriarchy is not much different from that of a
young American negro whose ambition is blocked from the start and who has to undergo a veritable struggle in merely raising himself to the level where problems begin to be posed for the whites (776). Women have to "accomplish more and demonstrate more than men in order to get ahead at the same rate", as Patricia Meyer Spacks observes (17).

Being nurtured in a society that caters exclusively to the well-being of men can spell disaster for a girl. When she finds herself a captive in "a man's world" she will necessarily be torn between the values that she has imbibed from her elders and her own ambitions regarding her future. If a society insists that fulfilment in life should be sought through living up to the image of the angel-in-the-house, leading a vicarious existence, it is also implied that a life of abnegation is expected of her.

The theory of the marginal status of woman in society has been questioned by Julia Kristeva, the French feminist. The concept of woman, according to her, is something that defies definition in the present set up. She believes that the projection of male and female as unquestioned essences can be dangerous for feminists. Following the binary model of difference, the masculine society would attribute something particularly distasteful as 'natural' for women and its opposite as 'masculine'. Kristeva asserts that in the power struggle it is not possible for a woman to exist positively. "She cannot be: she can only exist negatively, as it were, through her refusal of that which is given" (qtd. in Moi 163). According to her the concept of woman remains "outside naming and ideologies" (qtd. in Moi 163).

Kristeva equates the struggle of women with that of the working class. She maintains that curiously enough, both these groups are at once central and marginal. In striving to maintain the status quo, the established order
resorts to continued exploitation and oppression of these groups. They refuse to acknowledge their central economic role; on the contrary, they mask it by marginalizing them on the cultural, ideological and political levels. In Marxist terms these two groups, women and the working class, are fundamentally disparate since they are differently located in relation to the mode of production. But Kristeva points out that just as the working class is indispensable to the capitalist economy, women are central and not marginal to the process of reproduction, and incidentally, to the survival of the human race (qtd. in Moi 171).

Kristeva's argument takes us back to a passage in Engels's preface to The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State where he refers to production and the reproduction of immediate life as the determining factor in history according to the materialistic conception: "This again, is of a two-fold character: on the one side, the production of the means of existence, of food, clothing and shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation . . . " (71 - 72).

Engels's remarks offer sufficient authority to situate the issue of women's oppression in the context of a theory of general social reproduction. Further it vindicates the feminist movement's focus on the family, division of labour based on sex, and women's unpaid domestic labour.

De Beauvoir considers that the parallel drawn between women and the proletariat is particularly valid; since neither ever constituted a minority, it is a historical development rather than a single event in history that explains their status as a class in either case (xxi). The true magnitude of the ego damage done to woman by the minority status is yet to be explored by
psychologists. So far the minority status of the woman community has drawn very little attention of scholars. The definition of a minority group given by Louis Worth deserves mention. It is "any group of people, who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from others in the society in which they live for differential or unequal treatment" (347).

The damage done to women on account of minority status invites comparison with the effects of racism on the minds of the blacks and the colonized, according to Millett and other feminists. A feeling of inferiority and a sense of personal insecurity experienced by the subject may result in a group self-hatred and self-rejection. Besides these, traits such as "inferior intelligence, an instinctual or sensual gratification, an emotional nature both primitive and childlike, an imagined...affinity for sexuality...a wily habit of deceit and concealment of feeling" are attributed to the subject (Millett 80).

In order to attain individual autonomy and access to all the prerogatives reserved exclusively for men, leaders of the women's movement engaged in long struggles during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their arguments were grouped around two different foci which are logically opposed to each other -- arguments of 'sameness' and of 'difference' as Nancy F. Cott terms them. On the one hand, women argued that their intellectual and spiritual endowments were the same as those of men and they demanded equal opportunities with men in order to develop them. On the other hand, there was the argument that women were essentially different from men. The women who put forward the latter argument claimed their superiority to men by virtue of nature, environment or training. Their stand is that it served the best interests of both sexes if women are given equal opportunities (Cott 56).
Maggie Humm provides a temporal basis for the two different schools of feminism. She maintains that those who are principally concerned with similarities constitute "a first wave" and those who use women's differences to oppose the so-called legalities of a patriarchal world, a "second wave" in the evolution of feminism. Humm writes:

In broad terms, twentieth-century feminists choose one of two positions: largely first wave feminism [which might be said to end with Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949)] centres on debates about materialism, about women's individual and collective, social and political interests and self-determination. In second wave feminism the arguments are concerned with materiality -- moral solidarities created by feminist standpoints and identities based on differences which include women's material, psychic and affiliative strengths (*Feminisms: A Reader*).

It may not be proper to consider de Beauvoir as an ardent advocate of the concept of equality between the sexes. She does not seem to have subscribed to the concept as is made clear by her own words. In *The Second Sex*, she refers to "the 'doubtful' concept of 'equality in inequality'" of the sexes which is used by the male to "mask his despotism" and by the female to "mask her cowardice" (803).

"Difference" is a concept which has significant implications in feminist literary criticism. It is the basic concept of difference that invests the linguistic units with meaning marking off one from another, according to Ferdinand de Saussure. On an analogy it may be said that man can have a meaningful existence of his own only as relative to that of woman who is termed other in phallogocentric discourses (*Sturrock* 10).
When we consider the works of women poets in the light of feminist theory it becomes necessary to examine the different foci of gender differences. Elaine Showalter, noted feminist critic, postulates four such models of difference in dealing with women's writing. They are biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural (249). Raman Selden, in discussing gender difference has included "experience" as a criterion (130). The insistence of feminists on women articulating their own experience is the corollary of the fact that reality as perceived and experienced by women is not identical with what patriarchy has dictated it to be. In fact, women's experience, like the words of Cassandra, which were fated never to be taken seriously, has assumed so much of importance in feminist poetics that it is supposed to be competent enough to serve as a substitute for the missing tradition in women's writing. Hence experience has also been included as a criterion in the present paper in probing gender difference. Therefore in this study of gender politics in the poetry of Adrienne Rich and Kamala Das, five different foci of "Difference" are taken into account -- biological, cultural, experiential, psychoanalytic and linguistic. These divisions are not strictly water-tight compartments and naturally enough, overlappings are bound to occur.

According to the proponents of the biological aspect of 'Difference' it is the biological factors which are basic in determining the difference between the sexes. Firestone, who is usually regarded as the founder of radical feminism, is the chief exponent of this theory. She draws on Marxist concepts in arguing that division on the basis of sex rather than of economic class is the most basic social divide. In The Dialectic of Sex (1970), she argues that woman's reproductive capacities make her vulnerable to male control and that this has led to her being subordinated throughout history. Such an explanation of
difference in terms of biological factors would suggest that a woman's body is her destiny and that there is no escape from it. The saying "woman is nothing but a womb" sums up this attitude in all its crudity.

Feminists who subscribe to the theory of difference based on biological factors insist that the gender difference is something that sustains the peculiarities of a feminine psyche. In other words they hold the view that this difference is more than superficial but has something to do with the physical and psychic make-up in a woman. Moreover, in the case of a woman writer, this difference is decisive to an extent in determining her relation to writing.

Even though very few feminists share Firestone's biologism, the issues of sexuality and reproduction have been considered central in bringing about male domination. Millett suggests that if woman's biology is a contributing factor to her oppression, it derives from the patriarchal association of woman with "impure" matter. According to Humm, it is "the institutionalization of reproduction by patriarchy" that curtails woman's freedom of opportunity in the sphere of production. The notion of "biological fate" restricts the freedom of young women regarding their careers and very often it leads them to decide in favour of part-time and low-paid work which would leave them sufficient free time to take care of their children and to manage the household chores, rather than accepting full time work from which they can expect better pay and job satisfaction (Feminisms 53).

In discussing biological differences it should be taken into account that a common characteristic found in all mammals is that the male species have a heavier muscular development than the female. According to medical science, this is biological in origin. But Millett points out that this feature is culturally
encouraged through breeding, diet and exercise. She states that this can hardly be considered an adequate category on which political relations within civilizations can be based (36). In a civilized society which lays claim to have advanced far from the primitive stage a declaration that "might is right" cannot be entertained. Civilization has always substituted alternatives such as technical skill, weaponry, knowledge and value system for physical strength. Millett argues that physical exertion has always been something done by those at the bottom levels of social hierarchy, whether they are physically strong or not (36).

The cultural factor of difference is stressed by many feminists who are not ready to subscribe to the view that women are 'naturally' defined by their biological characteristics which endow them with maternal capacities. De Beauvoir's remark that "one is not born a woman, one becomes one" throws light on the role culture plays in moulding gender. It was with the publication of The Second Sex by her that a general awareness set in regarding this aspect. Cultural difference can be traced to dissimilarities between the sexes regarding temperament, role and status.

Millett refers to temperament as the psychological component; role, the sociological component and status, the political component. Introducing the term "sexual politics" Millett maintains the view that sex is a status category with political implications employed by patriarchy which adopts a set of stratagems and techniques of control for its perpetuation. She holds the view that sexual politics is maintained in patriarchal polities with regard to temperament, role and status.

Temperament involves the formation of human personality along stereotyped lines of sex category. Accordingly qualities which the dominant
group cherishes are attributed to the male and qualities which the dominant group finds convenient in subordinates are ascribed to the female. While qualities such as aggression, intelligence, force, virility and efficacy are considered masculine, 'virtue' and inefficacy are thought to be purely feminine. Millett has drawn our attention to the distinction between "sex" and "gender" which cannot be used as synonyms; whereas sex is determined on the basis of biology, gender is a psychological concept which refers to culturally acquired sexual identity. For several months after the birth of an infant, it is a condition of "psycho-sexual undifferentiation" that exists (Money 12). According to experts like Stoller "core gender identity" is established in an infant by the age of eighteen months. The decisive factor in the steady maintenance of temperamental differences between the sexes is the conditioning that is given in early childhood (Millett 41-43). The different cultural contexts and differing experiences in the patriarchal institutions, beginning with the family, contribute to the development of gendered human beings.

The image that man has succeeded in evolving for woman is just as he would like her to be--as his helper, dependent and slave, leading a vicarious existence for promoting his welfare and happiness, denying her own self. Male writers have provided role models in profusion for men and women to copy in their lives. Actions which are considered assertive in a man are judged aggressive and unseemly in a woman.

In spite of the great strides made by women in educational and professional attainment, the majority of women are prone to accept these views since they have been bound to them for generations. Thus their own estimate of womanhood is coloured by man-made myths. "The roots may be in the
patriarchy but they have grown into us" wrote the American novelist, Cris South (qtd. in BBP 83).

The institution of family which is at the core of patriarchal set up has necessitated and promoted the concept of division of labour on the basis of gender. Patriarchal culture insists that a woman should confine her life to cooking, cleaning, washing and bearing and rearing children ignoring her intelligence, education, human potency and even her selfhood. Society has relegated woman to an identity based on her biological attributes which incapacitates her to bear children and propagate the species. As Gayle Rubin argues, a woman who enters into a marriage relationship takes her place in the symbolic and social order by accepting a definition of herself as "the one who lacks a penis" and consenting to her role as a child-bearer (qtd. in Gayle 8).

Traditionally, woman has been assigned the function of the rearing of the next generation in addition to reproduction, a job for which they are patronized rather than paid. More than anyone else, it is the mother who contributes to the welfare of the entire family. Still the status she wields in the house is in no way covetable since she is almost always a subordinate.

The patriarchal myths incorporating archetypal images and role models have been internalized by men and women over the ages and it calls for immense effort on the part of women to liberate themselves from the cultural influence imbibed by them. Each of them has to live through an experience of casting off the image imposed by society in order to find an authentic identity. An archetypal image of woman cherished for ages has been "the angel-in-the-house" which Virginia Woolf has elaborated in the following manner:

Intensely sympathetic... immensely charming... utterly
unselfish, excelled in the difficult arts of family life, sacrificed herself daily. In short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or wish of her own, but preferred to sympathise always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all... she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty -- her blushes, her great grace. In those days -- the last of Queen Victoria -- every house had its Angel ("Professions" 39).

The myths of "feminine mystique" and "fulfilled motherhood", which are also patriarchal contributions, have clipped the wings of feminine aspirations all over the world. Friedan traces the image of woman projected in *McCalls*, a popular women's magazine in the early 1960's in the following words:

The image of woman that emerges from this big, pretty magazine is young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine, passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies and home. The magazine surely does not leave out sex; the only passion, the only pursuit, the only goal a woman is permitted is the pursuit of a man... In the magazine image, women do not work except housework and work to keep their bodies beautiful and to get and keep a man (The Feminine Mystique 36).

Friedan wants us to remember that it was at a time when men were trained to travel into outer space that women's world was confined to her own body and beauty, the charming of man, the bearing of babies and the physical care and serving of husband, children and home (36).

The "feminine mystique" of the west corresponds to the Vedic ideal of Aryan womanhood in the Indian context. As pointed out by Satchidanandan, the "Aryan mystique of womanhood, is a celebration of domesticity, submission to the
father, husband and sons in the different stages of life." It idealizes "ascetic endurance" on the part of woman and legitimates and upholds even inhuman practices like 'sati' (81).

These myths of "feminine mystique" and "fulfilled motherhood" are deliberately manipulated by the patriarchy to exert a cultural influence in moulding role models. Even though womanhood is seemingly extolled by these concepts they are contrived to tap woman energy and woman power and keep it under subjugation. Insights of psychoanalysis and anthropology have revealed that myth represents and defines human consciousness. Levi Strauss has commented on the potential of myth as a source of patterns which can have a great impact on the human psyche. In this context the role played by the so-called fairy tales which are seemingly innocent but are, in fact, cultural forms capable of consolidating ideas and beliefs should be taken note of. Feminists consider 'romantic love' as a myth contributed by fairy tales. The message that the best thing that can happen to a girl is to fall in love and marry the right man and live with him happily ever after has been propagated by fairy tales. It is a myth that traps young women into "underachieving at school and sacrificing careers of their own" in the expectation that marriage is the 'be-all and end-all' of their lives (Ruthven 79). Firestone underscores the same idea when she states that romantic love is "the pivot of women's oppression" (121).

As a result of consciousness-raising by feminists women have developed a realistic perception of the facts and experiences of life shorn of the romantic illusions which used to surround them. The insights of psychoanalysis have revealed that fairy tales are not just entertaining fantasies but are "powerful transmitters of romantic myths which encourage women to internalize only
aspirations deemed appropriate to their ‘real’ sexual functions within a patriarchy" (Ruthven 80). Lieberman refers to fairy tales as training manuals for girls" which serve to “acculturate women to traditional roles" (383).

The influence that fairy tales exert on young girls has been found to be pernicious by feminist standards. The values of passivity and submission are nurtured by most of these tales. Besides, constant exposure to the “beautiful princess” is likely to lead a girl to equate worthiness with beauty. Her utmost concern in life would be to avoid being “an ugly sister, cruel stepmother, hag or witch” for she learns from the fairy tales that all such women are disapproved and adjudged “sexually undesirable” by men (Ruthven 80). It is by the imposition of the patriarchal culture that women, especially the young and unmarried, give undue importance to their personal appearance and take pains to remain attractive. The frequency of their visits to the beauty parlours indicate “the cultural importance of female attractiveness” (Gatlin 67).

Feminists assert that fulfilled motherhood, for instance, is just a myth propagated by patriarchy in order to deflect attention from the excruciating “calvary of pregnancy” (Ruthven 79). It has been stated that even Queen Victoria, who was reticent by nature, confessed to feeling “like a cow or a dog at such moments” rather than having any sense of fulfilment (79). The logical deduction one may arrive at is that it is in the interests of patriarchy that ‘motherhood’ is glorified. Patriarchal manipulations have resulted in motherhood being construed as “the sacred calling” and as the ultimate destiny of womanhood. Women are called upon to assume the major burden of pain and self-denial for the furtherance of the species and to remain essentially unquestioning and unenlightened. Rich makes this idea explicit through her unique work, Of Woman Born.
An examination of the politics of housework brings out the gross inequality between the time spent at work by women and by men. It has been observed that women who are "just over half humanity [do] much more than half the labour of the world." This provides an explanation for the way women have been shut out from the arena of public life. Relegating woman to housework signified her "total erasure... within the masculinist construction of culture" (Rose 163).

It is an accepted practice that a woman is expected to keep her house and premises scrupulously neat; if she fails to do so, she will be written off as incompetent and irresponsible. A bachelor’s lodging, on the contrary, is assumed to be a place where no sort of order or discipline is to be looked for. Incidentally, a woman who is condemned to struggle through her life with the unending chores of housework has “her whole lifetime converted into labour time” (Rose 164).

Revising these patriarchal myths is one of the concerns taken up by feminist academics. Rich considers that the act of “re-vision” is “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction... an act of survival” (OLSS 35). The recasting of myth to denote a shift in consciousness has phenomenal importance. Alicia Ostriker, the leading feminist critic, sees such “revisionary myth making” as a project to raid “the sanctuaries of existing language, the treasuries where our meaning of ‘male’ and ‘female’ have been preserved” ("The Thieves" 71). It is indeed remarkable that in such cultural conditioning the decisive role is played by women, particularly the elderly ones, who are the custodians and keepers of patriarchal traditions and practices. Rich suggests this very idea in the following lines: "Has Nature shown / her household books to you, daughter-in-law, / that her sons never saw?"
Activists the world over have raised their voice against the patriarchal tendency to look down upon woman as an object or a possession of man, denying her the right as a free individual who can exercise her discretion and intellectual capabilities, make her own choices in life and play her role in decision-making which can bring about drastic changes in her life and in the life of the universe. In The Second Sex, de Beauvoir depicts the status of woman in a patriarchal society as the perennial object doomed to immanence and passivity, blocked from activity and transcendence. She points out that woman is trained and imprisoned in the exclusive vocation of love which is, in fact, "a gilded confinement" for her, but of which she herself is not aware. Kierkegaard has reflected on the miserable plight of woman in the following words: "What a misfortune to be a woman! And yet the misfortune when one is a woman, is at bottom not to comprehend that it is one" (qtd. in de Beauvoir 800).

Women's experience is considered as one of the significant foci on which the essential differences between the sexes rest. Feminists, being aware of the lack of a well-defined literary tradition, are preoccupied with providing a possible substitute for it and some consider that women's experience through the ages would make a possible substitute. An examination of the lives of women of the past will make it clear that they had to go through a saga of suffering for centuries by virtue of their femaleness. Poetry is used as a means of introducing, examining and learning about the history of women and of providing "experiential access" to lives of women in the past (Batsleer, et al 111). Female experience is posited at the centre of their aesthetics by many women poets. In fact the central notion of radical feminist poetics is that poetry articulates personal experience.
However there are critics who are of the view that "experience" being considered a criterion for women's poetry can be of little help. The assumption of an authenticating essence of female subjectivity, usually identified with female bodily experience defines and includes all women. However it tends to be potentially reductive. Many women critics have openly disagreed with the idea of a woman's tradition authenticated by female experience since it implies the essentialist orthodoxy (Montefiore 62-63). Robert Graves's line "There is one story and one story only" in his poem "To Juan at Winter Solstice" may be taken as a warning to critics. But Montefiore's suggestion is that women poets of the past and present should be read with a view to comprehending their covert or declared awareness of themselves as women (Montefiore 5).

Ostriker argues that a woman's poem should be assessed on the basis of a new methodology, namely, the degree to which it reveals the female self. Her claim is that the female self had been muted in nineteenth century and early twentieth century poetry, but it has asserted itself in contemporary women's poetry. It calls for immense determination on the part of a woman poet to overcome inhibitions and depict intimate experiences in her life in order to assert herself in poetry. This involves waging a war with the codes of society which require that a woman should lead a closed existence and that she should be quiet and submissive. Almost all her physical experiences were considered taboo by society. Feminist writers have been making a deliberate endeavour to transcend all the inhibitions imposed on them. In order to bring about basic changes, they are prepared to "tell each other everything [they] can because [they] know that this intimate difficult exchange makes a difference, is the process of change" (Mohin 4). As Rich puts it, "writing is re-naming" and "naming" according to Sartre, "is changing."
Patriarchal society which refused to take women seriously took all possible measures to repress women and consequently, their experiences have been marginalized too. It was with the emergence of feminism that a number of disparities and anomalies that have gone unobserved and unquestioned in society for long have been brought to the foreground. Feminists have reiterated their disgust about what it has meant to be female in this "man's world" (Rich, "Waking in the Dark" 50; De Beauvoir 756).

Dale Spender is acutely aware of woman's muted and 'invisible' existence in the male supremacist society where her subjugated position is the order of the day. It denied her a place in history by marginalizing the historical experience of women. In such a social context it is not surprising that women consider poetry as a congenial medium for giving vent to their closeted experience. Poetry provides them with the challenge and promise of "a whole new psychic geography to be explored" while the lack of a tradition makes it difficult to "find language and images for a consciousness the women writers are just coming into" (Rich, "WWDA" 91). However it is to the credit of feminists that they have championed and won to an extent, the right of women to name experiences which are exclusively their own and which are basically different from male meanings. For instance, in the case of an experience like childbirth which is essentially one of woman and about which man has just a passive knowledge as spectator, it is logical to state that woman alone is competent enough to name the experience.

It is only recently that women have felt emboldened to clarify their experience of childbirth which hardly agrees with the rosy illusions and age-old beliefs surrounding it, which, evidently have been built up by the male-centred society. With women assuming the boldness to speak openly about
their experience, many shocking and inhuman aspects regarding childbirth have been brought out. The association of childbirth with "a monolithic experience of beauty and rapturous joy" to quote Spender, (56), has been repudiated with the divulging of the new meanings of this experience, and it has narrowed the distance between the actual experience and the form in which it is articulated. Women have gathered the boldness to rename motherhood in a way that is consistent with their experience of it. They call it "terrible", "awful", and causing them "writhe about in agony" (56). It is indeed not surprising that women were rather reluctant to speak openly about the reality of this experience until recently. As Spender remarks, a mother who speaks 'disparagingly' of childbirth to her daughter who has not gone through the experience is sure to be branded as "monstrous, and at best, be labelled, as embittered" (Man Made 57). Under such circumstances women who remain silent even if they find inconsistency between their own experience and the male version of it cannot be blamed. But their silence is likely to be of pernicious consequence since it will lead to the validation of the male version of the experience of motherhood, being unchallenged and perpetuated as unquestioned truth.

An account of women's experience will not be comprehensive without a reference to woman's work. This topic has also been dealt with under cultural difference of gender. In male-dominated society, according to the division of labour on the basis of gender, it is woman who is relegated all menial work that involves tedium and drudgery. She is condemned to work day in and day out consequent to which she is denied any spare time at all (Rose 164). By the imposition of patriarchal culture, she is the locus of manifold functions carried out by the household -- cooking and serving the meals, 'clearing up', keeping the home in order, washing, ironing, sweeping, baking, mending, chauffeuring,
shopping, taking care of the sick, in addition to the care of the children. Even though a woman has to carry out all the work that goes along with housekeeping and caring for the household in addition to her employment, if any, her multifarious work does not endow her with any worthiness; it is all taken for granted as natural. The undervaluation of woman’s work has been the practice for ages. All the domestic work that she puts in goes unnoticed, unrecorded, unappreciated and unrewarded.

Woman’s realm is supposed to be one in which neither intelligence nor skills are involved. Skilled work was considered the exclusive domain of man until quite recently. Moreover, if at all there is the presence of women in any significant way within an occupation, it is sure to be devalued in status and it follows that only modest financial reward can be expected from it (Rose 164). The experience of a woman who is anguished by an uncongenial world which makes her yearn for genuine companionship of women is depicted by Gauri Deshpande in "Female of the Species":

Sometimes you want to talk
about love and despair
and the ungratefulness of children.
A man is no use whatever then.
You want then your mother
or sister
Or the girl with whom you went through school.

You sit with them and talk.
She sews and you sit and sip
and speak of the rate of rice
and the price of tea
and the scarcity of cheese.
You know both that you've spoken
of love and despair and ungrateful children (In Their Own Voice 53).

Another focus in discussions of gender difference is the unconscious. Contrary to the view held by early feminists that psychoanalysis is detrimental to the cause of feminism, and that it contributes to promote patriarchal attitudes, feminists like Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose have taken a favourable stance. Mitchell's Psychoanalysis and Feminism was the first feminist text to explore the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and others as explanation of women's experience. In this work she argues that rejection of psychoanalysis and the works of Freud will prove disastrous for feminism.

Psychoanalysis makes it clear that women have a gendered difference from men which is constructed in and through their bodies, culture and language (Humm, Feminist Criticism 54). The concept of femininity was developed by psychoanalysis and it has come to be the core of Western theoretical discourse on the subject. While Freud has generally been given the credit for having supplied the insight into 'femininity' as much more of a rhetorical category than a natural one, feminist literary critics credit Luce Irigaray with this perceptible change.

Most feminists are agreed on the view that male and female sexuality are far from natural and unchangeable; their assumption is that both male and female sexuality are socially constructed (Jackson 226). The concept of sexuality which differentiates between 'masculinity' and 'femininity' has been probed deeply by de Beauvoir. Her conclusion is that in the writings of men, woman is
depicted as 'the Other' of the absolutist subject 'Man.' Irigaray's contention in "This Sex which is Not One" is that the definition of women's bodies as sexual takes place within masculine discourses which define them as objects of male desire; sexuality itself is constructed phallocentrically and "woman's lot is that of 'lack', 'atrophy' (of the sexual organ) and 'penis envy' the penis being the only sexual organ of recognized value" (qtd.in Jackson 231). Regarding the acquisition of sexual identity Millett and other feminists boldly overstepped the bounds set by Freud's theory of 'penis envy.' In formulating this theory Freud had accepted the repeated assertions of his female patients regarding their discontent with their status as women as an objective fact and derived a concept about how femininity is structured in each woman's mind. Millett argues that this theory is rooted in a fallacy. The possibility that the women patients of Freud were just echoing the prevailing masculine attitude to women was overlooked by Freud. Millett asserts that it was by an extension of this fallacy that Freud arrived at the conclusion that woman's so-called inferiority has its roots in her castration complex. Millett points out that the definition of the female is negative in Freudian concept which begins with penis envy; what she is is the result of the fact that she is not a male and that she lacks a penis. The point of contention of Millett is that it is not the penis that is the object of envy for girls but the social pretensions that it seems to endow on one. Hence she establishes that Freud seems to have been confused between biology and culture, anatomy and status.

Feminists like Mitchell and Rose consider that psychoanalysis provides an explanation for women's oppression in undifferentiated infant sexuality and unconscious resistance. The condition of psycho-sexual undifferentiation exists in an infant during the first few months; and 'core gender identity' is established
only by the time the infant is about eighteen months old. Initially, the child is locked in close symbiotic union with the mother and its desire is focused exclusively on her. Lacan named the dyadic relation between mother and infant "imaginary."

Feminists like Spivak interpret 'imaginary' as "a basically narcissistic relation of the subject to his/her ego, a relationship to other subjects as my 'counterparts', a relation to the world by means of ideological reflexes, a relation to meaning in terms of resemblance and unity" (qtd. in Montefiore 99). The mirror phase, a crucial moment of acquired identity, according to Lacan, is necessarily an illusion as the feminists see it since the perfection of the image denies the infantile helplessness of its actual body. As Lacan perceives it, human subjectivity begins only when the child takes up a position in language. Its identity as 'he' or 'she' is organized by its relation to the primary signifier of difference, the phallus. In this schema, the imaginary Dyad of mother and baby is an emotional deadlock, which can be resolved only by the 'third term' of language acquisition and castration complex.

Whereas the mother is the enemy of autonomy in the Freudian model, feminists consider that the entry of the father, the embodiment of law and language into the Dyad marks the beginning of the castration anxiety. This anxiety is the terminal crisis of the oedipal complex since it has the effect of placing a prohibition on the mother as the child's object of desire, precipitating the formation of the superego. With the loss of the father's authority, the superego is weakened and the mother becomes dominant (Doane and Hodges 87).

Radically opposed notions about female sexuality are seen to prevail in society. On the one hand woman in a male-dominated society is perceived as a
sex object, the gateway of evil, the one who tempts man to commit sin. An 'innocent' girl in a patriarchy is expected to be a virgin and on getting married, her sexuality is kept in check and privatized. Sex is supposed to be a taboo subject and references to physiological developments in accordance with the biological clock are considered 'improper' and showing unsophisticated taste. But the restraints and inhibitions imposed on a woman have no relevance when it comes to a man. If an extra-marital relationship between a man and a woman is made known it is only the woman who is ostracized by society. It will only boost the image of the man and will inspire a secret admiration for him in the public eye.

Thus while on the one hand a woman is encouraged to have a prolonged infancy at mind, it is perceived and interpreted as a kind of deficiency on her part. Critics even go to the extent of arguing that sexuality is totally absent in women's writing. Even though the chastity of the 'pure' virgin is extolled, it is not real admiration that the image of the pure woman evokes. Feminist psychoanalysts like Irigaray insist that specifically female eros should be recognized and validated in women's writing. Accordingly, Irigaray and others associate metaphors of fluidity and the imagery of water, oceans and dissolution with women's identity and sexuality in their poetry. Lesbian feminists emphasize the need to understand female sexuality in its own terms. They point out that the importance of the earliest bond between the little girl with her mother should be recognized.

The question of woman's identity figures in women's poetry. In fact a quest for identity is a major preoccupation of women poets. They are aware of the interconnectedness between the personal world and the public, and the world of the psyche and the external world. The submerged relationship of the self to
other selves is a theme explored by poets like Rich in their quest for identity. In cases in which issues like ethnicity are involved, identity becomes more problematic since there arises the question of multiple selves which will have to be resolved. Reference to an "alter ego" is not uncommon in women's poetry which makes it clear that what cannot be empirically achieved by the subject is made attainable through this device.

Feminists consider it a patriarchal manipulation that the mythical concept regarding the inferiority of woman has been made to appear as a positive reality. Politics, language, literature, religion, philosophy and science have all contributed towards affirming the dominance of man and the inferiority of woman.

Society perceives a "woman writer" as a contradiction in terms. A writer of originality, as de Beauvoir points out, is always "shocking and scandalous unless dead." A writer who feels obliged to seek pardon for her literary pretensions through her modesty and good taste will not be equipped sufficiently to adventure along strange ways. As Marie Bashkirtsev has observed, "the stupid and continual constraint" that is imposed on a woman from the early years of her upbringing will have the dampening effect of "shackling her thought" which is enough "to make her wings droop" (qtd.in de Beauvoir 791,92).

The attitude of condescension to woman is a reflection on the male perception of woman as an inferior being. On the part of the woman, the sense of inferiority that she has internalized over the ages proves to be a debilitating factor which stands in the way of her progress. She does not dare to aim high under the influence of it. In education and in career, it is her limitations as a woman -- physical disadvantages and more important, the male perception of her as an inferior being-- that she is bothered about and this leads her to choose
studies and careers which will not cause disruption to her family life. Woman has been under the curse of being a vassal for long and this curtails her freedom to do anything positive. De Beauvoir has expressed the view that so long as woman persists in the vain pursuit of her true being through narcissism, love or religion she is being ineffectual.

Reared in a society that maintains the tradition of male superiority, it is natural for a woman to feel that it is always man's privilege to occupy the first place and that she should be submissive to his authority. She may fear that in asserting her own position she may become instrumental in ruining domestic bliss. A woman who faces such a situation would be subjected to internal conflict; in de Beauvoir's words "between the desire to assert herself and the desire for self-effacement she is torn and divided" (772).

Critics point out that the impact made by the myth of female inferiority on women will be different from person to person; while it may manifest itself in the form of diffidence in some, in certain others it will take a more intense form -- "pathological self-hatred" and "unjustifiable contempt for other women's achievements" (Ruthven 34).

Woman is always the one who has to bear the stigma of guilt be it in her capacity as wife, mother or housekeeper. From times immemorial the burden of guilt has been tethered to woman. Perhaps such a practice had its beginning from Eve and Pandora; while Eve, the Biblical character has been held responsible for the fall of Man, Pandora is a mythical character whose curiosity led her to open the sealed box as a result of which all the evil spirits are said to have been released, thus sowing chaos everywhere in the world. Thus all the sufferings of humanity have been traced back to the momentary negligence of archetypal women.
Feminists contend that in spite of the subjugated position accorded to woman, even the term 'man' necessarily seeks reference to woman just as his very life depends on her since man is 'of woman born' (Rich, *Of Woman Born* 11). In order to have his domineering ways, he has to keep her subjugated. Woolf's depiction of Von X in *A Room of One's Own* is aimed at illustrating this point. A satirical sketch of the Professor who is engaged in writing his monumental work, "The Mental, Moral and Physical Inferiority of the Female Sex" is provided by Woolf:

His expression suggested that he was laboring under some emotion that made him jab his pen on the paper as if he were killing some noxious insect as he wrote, but even when he had killed it that did not satisfy him; he must go on killing it; and even so, some cause for anger and irritation remained. (32-33).

Here Woolf makes it explicit that man feels the need to perceive the female as inferior in an effort to assert his own superiority, which would remain dubious and uncertain otherwise.

The misogynist attitude in men's writing may be explained on the basis of the "lurking fear" in the mind of the male for woman in her capacity "as mother" (Rich, *Of Woman Born* 72, 84). The explanation for women being depicted as adulterous and deceitful in men's writing is also not much different. Very often it is the male sexual guilt that results in woman being looked upon as temptress. According to feminist critics like Rich and Susan Sontag, misogyny manifests itself in different ways of which pornography is one. They assert that pornography is a product of 'diseased imagination.' The feeling of inadequacy on the part of men would lead them to stamp women as nymphomaniacs. The term 'nymphomaniac' has derogatory connotations and signifies "a woman who
has an excessive desire for sex", but the same sense when applied to men, results in terms of commendation like 'virile' and 'potent' which enhance the male image. This indicates the 'double standard' maintained in society (Spender, Man Made 175).

One current of feminist criticism takes into account the linguistic differences between the sexes and with women's writing as a mode of resistance to patriarchal culture. The importance of language in life can never be overestimated since language determines the limits of our world and constructs our reality. It is through language that we become members of a community and language endows the world we inhabit with meaning. It is our means of ordering, classifying and manipulating the world. As Spender has pointed out, our view of the world is determined not solely by the images formed on our retina but also by the experience, knowledge, expectations and general inner state of the observer which may be culturally specific, determined by language (Man Made 141).

Even though both men and women use language they do not stand in the same relationship to it. Language is a cultural artifact for the production of which men have been primarily responsible as for the production of all cultural forms and images (12, 31). It is structured in such a way that the masculine factor is the norm and woman's place is extraneous to it. Jessie Bernard, reputed academic in sociology, has stated without equivocation that sociology is a male science of society which has been structured taking males as the reference point, assessing problems and determining priorities from their perspective, conducting research and constructing knowledge on these premises. This explains the exclusion of women from the codification of meanings, leaving the experiences of females "unreal" and "invisible". In anthropology, too, women were not taken.
into account in formulating the meanings, theories and structures as Edwin Ardener, noted anthropologist states. This led him to label men as the "dominant" group and women who were denied the means to express themselves, the "muted" group. In the field of language, too, the centrality of the male is taken for granted. In spite of the assertions made by male grammarians that the term 'man' is inclusive of woman also, it definitely means male and evokes male imagery. Feminists have underscored the manipulation of patriarchy in this linguistic device. Catherine Belsey, for example, refers to the inappropriateness in using 'he' as a generalized pronoun even by women writers of the 1970s (4). However, it follows that if women were to be included in the race of man, it was to be on the tacit agreement that they were to remain unseen and unheard. Through the introduction of he/man in the thought and reality of human society the males become the foreground while females become the blurred and indecipherable background. He/man makes males linguistically visible, promotes male imagery in every day life at the expense of female imagery so that it appears reasonable to assume that the world is male. The influence exerted by language structured in this manner is so pervasive in life that everyone comes under the imperceptible compulsion to accept male reality. It seems reasonable to agree with Spender that the only semantic space for females in English is negative. Irigaray has explored the consequences of existing merely as a negative in language and her conclusion is that the alienation experienced by women is caused by this and the psychic processes, determined in part by language whereby women acquire their identities as women (qtd. in Montefiore 142).

The difficulty experienced by women writers, which Woolf referred to a century ago still holds good: "Now men are shocked if a woman says what she feels" wrote Woolf in recounting the difference between her mode of articulation.
and that of Joyce. She goes on to state further, "Yet literature which is always pulling blinds is not literature" ("Speech, Manuscript" 164).

The famous dictum of Emily Dickinson by way of advice to women writers, "Tell all the truth but tell it slant" speaks for the inhibitions experienced by women writers of all ages. Women as a group are virtually always in a non-hegemonic position. DuPlessis states that even though a woman may be connected with a dominant system of meanings and practices by her race or by her class, still she is outside hegemony by her gender. For women, existing in the dominant system of meanings and values that structure culture and society may be "a painful, or amusing, double dance, clicking in, clicking out -- the divided consciousness" (284-85). DuPlessis quotes Woolf as a classical example of such divided consciousness. Woolf gives a vivid description of that experience:

Again if one is a woman one is often surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness, say in walking down Whitehall, when from being the natural inheritor of that civilization, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical. (A Room 101).

DuPlessis calls that shifting focus which brings the world into different perspectives, the ontological situation of women. It is in fact the still prevailing social situation which women have to go through. It explains the relationship of women to language and to all the cultural practices and manifestations of power.

According to patriarchal tradition, language is the prerogative of the male and as such there is something incongruent about a woman becoming an "author," one who generates meaning. The impropriety of woman being a writer is suggested by David Lodge when he asserts that the "medium of fiction is
never virgin; words come to the writer already violated by other men" (Langu. of Fiction 47). Jacques Derrida, in an attempt to criticize what he calls phallocentrism, describes the literary process in terms of the identification of the pen with the penis and the hymen with the page (qtd. in Gabar 295). The traditional model of the pen-penis writing on the virgin page identifies the author as a male who is primary and the female as his passive creation, a secondary object lacking autonomy. Woman, according to this concept, is no more than an artifact within culture; she is excluded from the creation of culture. This is why the traditional outlook is problematic for women who want to appropriate the pen by becoming writers (Gabar 295).

The contribution made by French feminist theoreticians to language is indeed significant. The question of an écriture féminine occupied the central position in the cultural debate in France in the 1970s, largely due to the efforts of Helene Cixous (Moi 102). The nexus between women, femininity, feminism and the production of texts was explored by her through a series of writings. "The Laugh of the Medusa," an important contribution of hers is regarded as "a continuum that encourages non-linear forms of reading." Her speaking subject lays claim to all possible subject positions proclaiming herself as a "féminine plural" and "partakes of divine eternity through reading and writing" (Moi 102).

Many French feminists are not in favour of labels, names and "-isms" in particular since they deem such labelling activity as "betraying a phallogocentric drive to stabilize, organize and rationalize our conceptual universe" (159). Hence it is not surprising that though Cixous is in support of the women's movement she rejects the label 'feminism'. According to her, feminism is "a bourgeois, egalitarian demand for women to obtain power in the present patriarchal system" (qtd. in Moi 103). Irigaray asserts that no definition of woman is
acceptable as complete or final within the parameters of masculine ideology. "Woman" tends to be 'evasive' since she does not fit into the masculine parameters (qtd. in Montefiore 148).

Kristeva is another French feminist critic who disapproves of all patriarchal labelling. Her theory of language is that it is a heterogeneous signifying process located in and between speaking subjects. Such a theory of language necessitates a different approach in the study of language. The study should be focused on language as discourse. In doing this, sentence cannot be retained as the minimal unit in linguistic study. The whole text, rather than isolated sentences, should be the corpus of study. It means studying its "ideological, political and psychoanalytical articulations, its relations with society, with the psyche and... with other texts" (Moi 155, 56). It is Kristeva who has coined the concept of intertextuality.

The quest for identity is a theme which assumes great proportions in women's poetry. It is in a way a subversive practice in literature since the quest theme used to be associated with male heroes in traditional literature. Both the poets under discussion, Rich and Das, are preoccupied with the search for identity.

With the recent shift in emphasis "from the pen to the page" associated with post-modernism" in a"decentered universe where 'man' is no longer privileged" (DuPlessis 286), women's writing has assumed more significance. Difference in acculturation for men and women which in turn lead to difference in perspectives and experiences has been acknowledged and validated. Thus feminist perspectives which are pluralistic in nature and essentially different from the established male perspective have gained recognition and have even made their way to the academies. It is under such a cultural climate that the study of the two noted women poets, Rich and Das, has been undertaken.