CHAPTER TWO

WOMANISM

Another manifestation of individualism of the Romantics can be seen in their depiction of women. The literary works of the Romantics are dominated by women characters of a new type who completely differ from those depicted in the classical as well as neo-classical literary works.

- *The Harp and the Veena* (85)

They know that never joy illumed by brow
Unlinked with hope that thou wouldst free
This world from its dark slavery,
That thou-O awful Loveliness,
Wouldst give what’er these words cannot express.

- *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* (68-72)

You talk of freedom and the flood of mercy.
If you should deny women their freedom
Then there is not life at all on this earth.

- *Manumission of Woman* (45)

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2. Womanism

2.1. Womanism and Feminism

Basically ‘womanist, womanism, womanish’ are terms associated with various conditions of black womankind. The term feminism is popular in the West, as a critical credo, expressing basic gender issues related to women; but then, the black women, mostly African Americans, who felt their socio-political consciousness not adequately represented in the struggle for the full blossoming of a woman as an autonomous human-person, as held by the feminist (of whatever hues and complexion), it became necessary on the part of the oppressed and the marginalized communities, as well as their creative literary artists, to evolve their notions on womanism (Deborah K. King 1486).

It is true that feminism and womanism apparently may have difference in perceptions; but in reality, be it womanism or feminism, while the focus remains the same, there is only shift in emphasis in the periphery of reasoning and the analytical deductions. The terms, womanist and womanism may, therefore, in an extended sense be made applicable to all women, not necessarily of African descent. And particularly it represents the characteristics of gender, old traits and practices of African American women, maybe with biological extension it may be said to represent the problems and issues of all women, more so the discriminated women (cf. Deborah K. King 1485-87).

Alice Walker originally introduced the term ‘womanist’ in the African American context (“Preface” ix); but the fact of the matter is that the ideals
behind womanism have a long standing significance as much in black culture as in similar cultures of discrimination, oppression, alienation, subjugation and subordination of women on the basics of identity of sex and gender. Long before Sojourner Truth’s query “Ain’t I a woman?” and continuing through contemporary African women’s writings, womanism has had its impact in literary as well as socio-cultural domains. In the words of Deborah K. King:

Womanism represents an expectation and experience of female knowledge, competence and responsibilities that are beyond those associated either with youth or with the gender traits traditionally assigned females in the Western culture. Its characterization of women as audacious as well as capable of contrasts with an image of females under patriarchy as submissive and inferior. It is significant to note that while black males regardless of their ages, have been stereotypically addressed as “boys”, black females were supposedly denigrated by being referred to as “women”, rather than “ladies”. However, the connotations of “women” within the black community have become positive ones, asserting and affirming the value in females of adult qualities such as ability, independence, creativity, loving, and strength.

(1486)

Again as Deborah King clearly demonstrates ‘womanish’, the term stands for “an attitude or orientation or a perception toward life of strong willed opinionated self confidence” (1486). As she goes on to argue, within black communities, even young girls are referred to as ‘womanish’, that is
behaving like, or assuming the responsibilities and prerogatives of older, adult females. In fact, black females necessarily assume adult roles and develop a maturity at very young ages.

When viewed in a larger context as opposed to feminism, in any form or in any shape, which is exclusive, womanism as a socio-political concept is more inclusive. The term womanist thus identifies, “Someone with a respect for, an appreciation for, and the reliance upon the capabilities of women” (Deborah K. King 1486).

A womanist is decidedly pro-woman. A womanist may, therefore, be an advocate of women’s interest, equity and enrichment within familial community, religious, educational, economic, political, and social relationships and institutions. In other words, womanism has a greater scope and deeper intensity than feminism. It seeks to accommodate as much the interest of affected women as those of the marginalised and the oppressed. Perhaps the strength of womanism is that even as it treats within its focus everything that would engender the empowerment of women, it solicits the support and solidarity of every other person, be it a male or female, in its great mission of addressing, attacking and solving women’s issues. This advocacy and activism include an array of multifaceted endeavours both homo-social and homo-sexual.

Yet as Alice Walker and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi observe: “A womanist is not a separatist, more so a female separatist”. To put differently, the concerns of the womanist perspectives provide the legitimate space for
survival, affirmation, and empowerment of all persons, male and female. It, therefore, becomes an interesting logical corollary that womanism which encompasses a ‘black feminism’ has also equally been applied generally to feminist of colour as well. Generally speaking a womanist is spirited and spiritual, determining and decisive committed to struggle and convinced of victory (cf. Deborah K. King 1487). What is true of the particular experiences and cultural heritage of black women is equally true of similar women placed in similar contexts, but in different cultural backdrop and socio political realities. Womanism, thus, theoretically speaking, is a concept or an ideal that contributes to resisting systems of domination, and insisting on the liberty, empowerment, self actualisation and self determination of all people.

Womanism is a term preferred by many black feminists because it is rooted in black culture whereas the word feminism is perceived as coming out of a white woman’s culture (Women Studies Encyclopedia 1487). Alice Walker, who has done much to publicise the term, has said that although it is not better than the word feminism, she prefers “the sound, the feel, the fit of it and believes that new words are important to help the society recognize changes that old words cannot describe” (qtd. in Lisa Tuttle 352). As a term that covers a wider space of women’s issues, before the word the feminism gained widespread acceptance in the 1890’s, womanism, as an ideology and movement, stands for advocacy of women’s rights, enthusiasm for women’s achievements, abilities, and qualities. A womanist believes in women’s
equality and even superiority to men (although not sideling men but supplementing them) as well as any positive, pro-woman stance.

But from a historical perspective, ‘womanist’ is a self descriptive term used by black feminists and feminists of colour. The advantage being that it avoids the ‘racist feminist’, so long as only the non white feminist requires the qualifying prefix. That is, ‘black feminism’ implies that feminism is self evidently part of white woman’s culture and thus, wittingly or unwittingly, the very use of the term feminism gives room for a tinge of a shade of racial connotation and the racist discrimination. The classic definition offered by Alice Walker, way back in 1979, is ideally suited for any studies that would relate to women’s concerns and gender issues in general and in particular, and could well be brought within rubric of womanism (cf. Lissa Tuttle 349-53). In short, womanist encompasses feminist, too, and also refers to someone who is instinctively pro-women, not necessarily a woman activist but a man activist championing women’s concern as well. Shelley’s and Bharathi’s concern for women are, therefore, treated in this study under the general framework of the womanist notions of everything that concerns itself with women studies and everyone who voices his or her concern in respect of women’s liberation and freedom.

2.2. A Human Rights Violation

Since the olden times, women have been treated as second rate citizens of all lands and nations and across the globe. The situation is almost the same everywhere irrespective of the socio-political and economic-cultural status of
the country as developed country or the developing country. Women have been neglected to secondary position despite the fact that they numerically constitute about half the world population, not just today, but over the past millennium and millennium. This situation has caused immense loss and damage to their self-dignity as human beings and also their independent existence as part of the human race enjoying an autonomy of their own. Gender inequality is, first and foremost, a human rights violation against women and girls, including gender based violence, economic discrimination, reproductive health inequalities and harmful traditional practices that remain and continue to be the most pervasive and persistent form of inequality. Gender equality implies a society in which women and men enjoy the same opportunities, outcomes, rights and obligations in all spheres of life. Equality between men and women exists when both sexes are able to share equally in the distribution of power and influence.

It is not in India alone where the plight of women is pitiable and their status has been depleting and losing its intensity, day by day; but it is an international/global phenomenon. For, exploitation of women, in the forms of domestic violence, rape and sexual abuse in one form or the other, is equally found throughout the world. Thus, the stature of women was destroyed in the past throughout the world. This is a process that started from the early dawn of human civilization. The women were treated as chattel in the early Roman society. In France they were termed as half-soul creatures responsible for the destruction of society. The Chinese considered them as devil’s soul. Japanese
men preferred to live unmarried lives. Before the advent of Islam, Arabs buried their daughters alive considering them as a sign of disgrace (cf. Lissa Tuttle 340). In this way, they deprived women of their due place in family as well as in society. Most men view themselves as being the superior life-form in society. They justify this belief by saying that they are stronger and more capable. They place themselves on pedestals and force women to believe in their own inferiority to men and their incapability to excel educationally, politically economically and domestically.

India, the sub-continent, is indubitably a great country of miscellaneous cultures, traditions, religions, castes and geographical characteristics. However, India, like every other country, is even known for its sobriquet male chauvinistic notion. It is Bharath Matha who is, in turn, a woman that serves as the mother of every Indian. While such a noble mother looks after every Indian child, women in general are simply being disregarded at the dominant men’s will and pleasure. Perhaps the pitiable irony is that the social structure has been formulated in such a way that women are marginalized. And the still worst irony is that women themselves have not been able to realize that male domination is a tool that is used by men to limit their potential.

A woman is a woman and a woman she must remain, but not a man’s shadow self. A woman is held to represent the “otherness” of the man. A development of feminist thought, at the outset, of this century, has brought
about a perceptive change in our outlook towards women. Now women are, at least in principle, one with men and no their ‘Otherness’ (Chaman Nahal 10).

According to Chaman Nahal, men have taken up cudgels for women. No longer they are colons to their sexual and gender exploitation. Gandhiji gave a new direction and dimension to the Feminist/Womanist Movement in India and freed women from passivity and servility. Thus feminism/womanism has now emerged as a new way of life (cf. Chaman Nahal 17).

In other words, a new perspective has dawned on the social horizon with the feminine psyche trying to redefine woman’s role in the society and re-assert her self-identity. The same women were once indoctrinated into believing that self-effacement, submission, tolerance, self-sacrifice and stoicism were classical virtues of [Indian] womanhood. And a woman, forever, has to be and has to remain a passive dependent and never, ever an independent person at all. To quote from Manu Smrithi: “In childhood a woman must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her lord is dead, to her sons. A woman must never be independent” (qtd. in ICSSR Report 13-14).

Like this, we find helpless and resigned women in the families. Society also characterizes women as ideally warm, gentle, dependent and submissive. Family life and the work patterns convey the idea that woman should be subordinate to and dependent on man. She is the mother of man who subsequently rules over her and wants to protect her and keep her under his control. Their voices go unheard and unsung in patriarchal world. Though the
world today is patriarchal and male ordained, the women have gained legal as well as social liberty to voice their problems and protest against injustices done to them.

But the tragedy of the contemporary community is that despite all cries of women’s rights, female emancipation and gender justice, women continue to be tortured and fractured both physically and psychologically by the patriarchal system which refuses to accord to them their dignity and autonomy. Men have created myths in all assorted shapes and colors which are expressions of very subtle manipulation for perpetuating the most inhuman and most ancient form of suppression. According to Tong:

As civilization developed, men discovered that one of the best ways to control woman is to construct myths about her – myths meant to explain the unexplainable, to simplify the complex, to rationalize the irrational. Throughout her analysis of man’s myths about woman, de Beauvoir stressed two points; First, what man wants from women is everything that man lacks; and second, woman is a chameleon whose being is as mutable as nature. (205)

2.3. Anti-Masculinist Movements

In 1872, to designate the then emerging movement for women’s rights, a French dramatist named Alexander Dumas, the younger, used first the form ‘feminism’, an anti-masculinist movement of the women, for assertion of their individual rights (cf. Lissa Tuttle 348). Feminism recognizes the inadequacy of male created ideologies and struggle for the spiritual, economic, social and
racial equality of women who are sexually colonized and biologically subjugated. As Sara Grimke rightly comments:

Man has subjugated woman to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort, but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill. He has does all he could to debase and enslave her mind. (10)

Feminism strives to undo this tilted and distorted image of woman whose cries for freedom and equality have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world, a ‘male’s culture’. Thus denied of freedom to act and choose on their own, women remained soled inside the field of illusion, more illusion to be dreamt and cherished.

It is against such a conceptual notion of women that both feminists and womanists raise their voices, apparently not from contradicting standpoints, but rather from complementary viewpoints. In the words of Rekha Datta:

Feminist movement began in opposition to the suppression of woman and the act of suppression itself, in various forms. The agents of suppression have been from religion, political institutions, and to domestic domains and acts of suppression were both by men and women at different times. Writers have been alert to and detailed the politics of suppression by society, in various fields and also in interpersonal relationships. (15)
The Feminist movement, in the West, has always been concerned with the politics of inequality in all aspects of a women’s life. Thus some of the traditional binary traits attributed to woman namely, delicate, emotional, irrational, incapable of decision making, etc., are shown to be ways to limiting woman’s abilities, obscuring her identity, restricting her to familial life. Thus she has remained an outsider to many endeavors of the society and when she did participate, she was either slighted or distrusted. Many frailties associated with the women have to be understood keeping this vital information in mind. Her lack of information and acumen was also traced to the lack of education in evolving the notions of women’s freedom and gender equality/justice. (Rekha Datta 19).

With this argument, that is, the lack of education that embers the mind irrespective of the gender, Mary Wollstonecraft\(^8\) virtually opened the way to woman’s emancipation as well as a discussion of the motive behind association of traits to gender by the society. But, one of the implications of this is also to point to the ways of integrating the women into society that she lives in and of the means of overcoming the domination of the patriarchy.

The writers in the colonized nation undertook to understand some of the important changes that were taking place during colonization in the

\(^8\) Mary Wollstonecraft was Godwin’s first wife and Mary Shelley’s mother, - Mary, when Shelley married her, he was ‘learning’ at the feet of William Godwin. Wollstonecraft is credited with a formidable feminine or rather womanist doctrine of liberty and empowerment of women as exemplified in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) that Shelley found, in the early stages of his being tutored in Godwin’s philosophy, at his own residence, extremely revolutionary and path-breaking and to a large extent this work impacted Shelley in evolving his perception of women and women’s emancipation.
society and the role of women. They also searched for the implications of the question of identity and the image of women. In India, however, the establishing of woman as a moral superior, as a guardian of the Indian values and customs, the importance given to the family during India’s struggle for freedom are all seen as efforts to build and retain the cultural independence (Rekha Datta 21).

A very intriguing fact about women’s oppression is that it has not abated at all and in fact it has only spread its tentacles all over, that women’s oppression looks so very natural and normal. Hence the vital issue for feminists is “. . . to reclaim from men control of their own bodies” (Weedon 17). Naturally, the emergence of various forms of feminism and womanism imply the extent of women’s oppression and the many approaches to overcoming and solving it.

The radical feminists perceive the biologically based subjugation of women as the most fundamental form of oppression. Patriarchy, according to Weedon, is seen as a trans-historical structure, which forces women to isolation and there is a very compelling need to forge a new woman’s culture that is independent of men. She points out the fact that radical feminists identify family as a ‘site’ of oppression of women through sexual slavery and enforced motherhood (cf. Weedon 17).

Weedon further observes that lesbianism and motherhood are seen as reasons for celebrations of femaleness and female sexuality. Radical feminists believe that woman’s procreative abilities are linked to their psychological
qualities which are seen as universally female rather than specific to contemporary patriarchal society. Constrained and restrained by male control, female sexuality and procreative abilities suffer from smothering and suffocation (cf. Weedon 17).

Weedon reiterates the fact that according to socialist feminism, human nature is the product of social interactions and changes. To them feminity and procreativity are only two aspects of being a woman. It includes the elimination of sexual division of labour and full participation of men in childrearing and reproductive freedom for women (cf. Weedon 18).

Liberal feminists are not averse to nuclear families. They demand that the right to decide to have children should be a decision that comes from both man and woman. They admit the fact that while family is a natural institution, the sexual divisions of labour are dictated and endorsed by patriarchal values. These feminists argue that professionalization of domestic labour and child-care on a commercial basis is the answer to uphold the quality of women and men would eventually abolish the sexual division of labour and that would result in an androgynous society, in which feminine and masculine qualities would be shared by all (Weedon 16-17). And in this respect the lesbians, too, claim the same rights for women, but to be acquired in a joint-endeavour involving and with the help of men with progressive outlook.

Men find the family as the most convenient and fertile ground to dominate women, without easily incurring the ire and fire from other quarters. Weedon notes that outside the purview of the family, men have to contend
with competition. And so the only power they have is the domination they exercise over their women at home (cf. Weedon 19).

Weedon rightly thinks that the rule of a mother, at home, also confers on her some kind of power and fringe benefits and so the women easily fail to see the subtle kind of manipulative control mechanisms of men (19). To put differently, feminists are aspiring to forge a culture that is completely women centered, excluding man from feminist discourse.

2.3. Womanism and/or Black Feminism

It is against this backdrop that the study of ‘feminism’, which the black women analysts choose to call ‘womanism’, derives its relevance and significance. In a way, ‘womanist and womanism’ are populist and poetic synonyms for black feminist and black feminism. These words/terms were coined in 1983 by Alice Walker – African American novelist, poet, essayist and activist – in her collection of essays, *In Search of our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* (2).

If feminism were not able to fully account for the experiences of black women, it would be necessary then to find other terminologies that could carry the weight of those experiences. Feminism needed a new word that would capture its complexity and fullness. It is in this regard that Alice Walker’s “Womanism” intervenes to make an important contribution. As Walker noted in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1984, “I don’t choose womanism because it is better than feminism, I choose, it because I prefer the sound, the feel, the fit of it, because I cherish the spirit of a woman” (13).
According to Alice Walker womanism means black feminism. The author attributed the word’s origin to the black folk expression of mothers to female children – ‘you acting womanish,’ that is, like a woman usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful behavior. Womanist appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s strength, committed to survival and the wholeness of the entire people, male and female. Womanism and Womanist were soon adopted by and often used in the descriptions of African American women’s struggle for self-determination and community, past and present. Welcomed by some for having a stronger sound than feminist, which shares the root of feminine – as Walker puts it, “Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender” (“Preface” xii).

There are critics who argue that feminism, as applied in principle to liberate the shackles of the Black women, took upon itself the hues of womanizing with radical shift in emphasis. As Barbara Omolade (1994) points out:

Black feminism is sometimes referred to as womanism because both are concerned with struggles against sexism and racism by black women who are themselves part of the black community’s efforts to achieve equity and liberty. (xx)

And Gloria Steinem says, “Womanist and womanism were not intended to define more narrowly or to light on women’s experience by increasing the number and richness of words describing it” (www.feminism womanism.html).
Womanist and womanism helped to give visibility to the experience of African American, and other women of colour, who have always been on the forefront of movements to overthrow the sexual and racial caste systems in coordination with like-minded men who see the growth of society in the growth and liberation of women and the ‘natural’ equality that nature has destined between man and woman. As Walker very appropriately points out: “Womanist literally includes man within it, just as embryo is enclosed by a woman’s body” (2).

In 1993 The American Heritage Dictionary included this new usage and defined womanist as “Having or expressing a belief in or respect abilities beyond the boundaries of race and class; exhibiting a feminism that is inclusive of Black American culture” (9). And again in respecting the talents of women and acknowledging women’s contributions to society, womanism takes a very positive and interestingly strong stand that, if not harmonises with, but effectively complements socialist feminism.

The concept has had a profound influence in the formulation of theories and analytical frameworks in women/gender studies, religious studies, black studies, and literary studies. Because of the linking of black women and spirituality in Walker’s project, many African-American female theologians have incorporated womanist perspectives in their work. Drawing on African-American history in general and the black church in particular, black womanist theologians interrogate the subordination of women and assume a leadership role in reconstructing knowledge about women.
Prominent black womanist theologians and scholars of religion – such as Cheryl Townsend Gilkes (2000), Katie Geneva Cannon (2006), Delores S. Williams (1995), Emilie Maureen Townes (2011), and Marcia Y. Riggs (2008) – bring womanist perspectives to bear on their black church, canon formation, social equality, black women’s club movement of the nineteenth century, race, gender, class, and social justice. The impact of womanism goes beyond the United States to Africa where many women scholars and literary critics like Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1985), Tuzyline Jita Allan (1996), and Mary Modupe Kolawole (1997), in particular, have embraced it as an analytical tool.

Womanism is a reaction to the realization that “feminism” does not encompass the perspectives of the Black women. It is a feminism that is “stronger in color”, nearly identical to “Black Feminism”. However, womanism does not need to be prefaced by the word “Black”, since the word automatically concerns black women. A womanist is a woman who loves women and appreciates women’s culture and power as something that is incorporated into the world as a whole. Womanism addresses the racist and classist aspects of white feminism and actively opposes separatist ideologies. It includes the word “man”, recognizing that Black men are an integral part of Black women’s lives as their children, lovers, and family members. Womanism accounts for the way in which black women support and empower black men, and serves as a tool for understanding the Black woman’s relationship to men as different from the white woman’s (Alice
Walker, “Preface” xi). It seeks to acknowledge and praise the power of Black women. Womanism is unique because it does not necessarily imply any political position or value system other than that of the honoring of Black women’s strength and experiences. Because it recognizes that women are survivors in a world that is oppressive on multiple platform, it seeks to celebrate the ways in which women negotiate these oppressions in their individual lives (Alice Walker xii).

Although Walker states that a womanist is a black feminist or feminist of colour, she insists that a black feminist as a womanist talks back to feminism, brings new demands and different perspectives to feminism and compels the expansion of feminist horizons in theory and practice. Womanism does not blame or point fingers. It does not belittle others or claim superiority over others (xii). It pertains to a ‘type of feminism’ that acknowledges the abilities and contributions of black women in conjunction with men of similar wavelength.

2.5. Shelley and Bharathi as Womanists

There has been a growing consciousness about the redeeming dimensions of womanism which believes in the uniqueness of both genders. It is this happily fused strength which alone can help women and men to reach their perfected selves. It is against the background of feminism that the study of womanism becomes meaningful as a very fertile area for a better and deeper understanding of Shelley and Bharathi as womanist writers.
Shelley, even as early as the closing part of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, in unequivocal and unambiguous terms pleaded for the cause of women. Especially at the time when, at least technically speaking, the about to emerge ideologies of feminism and womanism were not heard of, he was a sunny poet who came under the spell of the great loud-slogans of the French Revolution – Liberty, Fraternity, and Equality – which obviously implied, that not only are men born equal, whatever their estate in social life be, but women, too, are born equal.

The England that Shelley was born in, although there had been discrimination and tyranny which Shelley tooth and nail fought against, yet nevertheless provided him the most sanctimonious atmosphere charged with industrialization; first varying labour force, education for women, women attempting creative unity and gradually beginning to involve themselves in the factory of the social institution and these contributed to his evolving his ideals of womanhood and his ideology of women’s liberation.

Added to this, his association with William Godwin, particularly his first wife Mary Wollstonecraft and the mother of Mary Godwin whom Shelley later married, exerted a great influence on Shelley, particularly in respect of women’s liberation and empowerments.

Right from the Vedic writers down to Gandhiji and Swami Vivekananda at the pan national levels, and from Cankam writers in ancient Tamil land with a hoary past to Bharathi and Bharathi Dhasan in Tamil Literature or Dravidian culture including E.V. Ramaswamy Naiker
endearingly known as Thanthai Periyar, have time and again voiced women’s concerns. If one, therefore, generally and broadly could define womanism as an extremely inclusive notion that would provide the space for one who champions the women’s cause from any perspective based on any dimension, that would very conveniently offer the general paradigm of treating women’s issues as voiced by Shelley and Bharathi in their literary works.

Early 19th century saw the emergence of various socio-religious reform movements in India during the British rule. These were an expression of the rising national consciousness and spread of liberal ideas of the West among the Indians. In the social sphere, there were movements of caste reform or caste abolition, equal rights for women and a crusade against social and legal inequalities. Interestingly, the enlightened individuals of the male section took the lead in initiating efforts to abolish laws and customs which suppressed the women in society, and in a way thus anticipating and unawares inaugurating a womanist movement. Tamilnadu was one such state in which the freedom movement was in the forefront of social reforms. In the beginning the persons who voiced the discriminated status of women and thus set the agenda from their freedom were mostly men and Bharathi together with his poet-disciple Bharathi Dhason were in the vanguard in fulfilling the women’s rights. Thanks to its illustrious sons/daughters like Bharati (1882-1921), Bharathi Dhason (1891-1964), Muthulakshmi Reddy (1886-1968), E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker (1879-1973), C. Rajagopalachari (1878-1972), K. Kamaraj (1903-
1975) and C.N. Annadurai (1909-1969), the women’s movements became stronger and meaningful.

If girls today outshine boys in Tamilnadu, in academic excellence, the credit should go to Bharathi and Periyar. They chose women’s education and women’s emancipation as the single most important task in social reforms. Greatly pained by the ill treatment of women and the secondary status accorded to her by her kith and kin, Bharathi proclaimed it was foolishness that men show disrespect to womenhood. In his electrifying songs (“The New Woman”, “Glory of Womanhood”, “Liberation” and “Deliverance”) that he sang with gusto, Bharathi identified how a modern Indian woman should be. Setting aside the age-old ideas, she will be educated, cultured and brave and go all over the world to bring prosperity and development to her motherland. She will strive to wipe out false beliefs and superstitions, shoulder to shoulder with men and she will bring glory that will please the gods (“Woman’s Liberation” 9-16).

There have been a lot of instances, where historically viewed, in India where right from the ancient times down to the modern age writers, poets, statesmen and leaders have done a lot to improve the status of women. In other words, again when looked at from a womanist viewpoint, all their writings may be said to anticipate women’s liberation, perhaps expressing the womanist ideology and the womanist paradigm in expressing the silhouette outlines of the fast emerging notions of womanism. According to the novelist
and historian R.C. Dutt, the Vedic woman becomes the highest symbol of womanhood:

Women were honoured in ancient India more perhaps than among any other ancient nation on the face of the globe. They were considered the intellectual companions of their husbands . . . affectionate helpers in the journey of life . . . and inseparable partners in their religions duties. (90)

But historically, not due to any cultural cataclysm or chronological accident, but due to collective manipulation and ruthless exercise of physical powers, that over the years woman was cornered and conquered. And then, in the words of Dutt:

For the women, it has meant that they are born to live life as beasts of burden to die without having lived one moment for themselves, Their life is meant to be lived for others, to be sacrificed at the altar of society’s discrimination and allocation of a lower status to man. It is a life waste both physically and psychologically and self-worth, women see themselves as prisoners or slaves doomed to obedience and conformity. A woman finds release and freedom only in death. (90)

At the national level, perhaps Mahatma Gandhi was the major protagonist who led women into modern era. Many women participated in the independence movement which gave them an opportunity to step out of confinement of their homes. As Parikh and Garg rightly capture the situation:
Once they had taken that step the world was no longer the same for them. Their roles had taken a quantum leap; their vision had gone beyond four walls. Above all, they had their first inkling of the power of their potential. They became aware of their heritage. It was the first step in discovering who they were, where they were and which direction they would like to go. Like sleeping Beauty Indian women had awakened from years of slumber at the call of are opportunity to shape their destiny. (93)

Gandhiji acknowledged ‘Motherhood’ as the greatest gift women is endowed with. He even termed women as the ‘mother, maker and silent leader to man’ (3). His significant contribution in the making and well-being of the society and preservation of its culture through women as the ideal instrument can be never measured. He considered it to be the prime duty of women to preserve the sacredness of this precious gift and hand it down from generation to generation (7).

Though the precepts that are responsible for the low position of women have taken hold in the social fabric of day-to-day life, Gandhi has, throughout his long life of service, preached against the wrongs done to women in the name of law, tradition and even religion. But Gandhi was an iconoclast, too, in taking on the puranas and shastras that had heaped slander and shame on womankind. As Gandhi himself says:

Legislation has been mostly the handwork of men; and man has not always been fair and discriminates in performing that self-appointed
task. The largest part of our effort in promoting the regeneration of woman should be directed towards removing those blemishes which are represented in our *shastras*. (3)

Gandhiji never wished to constrain woman within the narrow circle of home. As a staunch devotee of truth and justice, Gandhi laid special emphasis on the necessity of reorienting women as equal to men. He reminded men of the teachings of the ancient Indian seers who honoured women. He called ‘upper’ women to shed the age-old mentality of slaves and help men in the process of human evolution. Gandhiji held a positive view towards women and considered gender equality as a necessary step in the improvement of Indian life. He even encouraged women to be involved in the freedom struggle. Gandhiji made efforts to eradicate evil customs like illiteracy, child marriage and widowhood. The progress of humankind is basically the progress of women. To quote Bali: “He (Gandhiji) thought that mankind as a whole could not make any progress in the real sense, if women, an important of it remained oppressed and neglected” (122). And these were the great pioneers who impacted Bharathi in his vision for women’s emancipation.

Shelley and Bharathi, both have almost sounded equal in strength to oppose the men who make women weaker. Shelley’s purpose, simultaneously to further the women’s freedom is poignantly made very clear in *The Revolt of Islam*. Cythna was thrown back on her own resources with the problem of how to live in a phenomenal world from which the visionary ideal had disappeared. She examines her own mind, seeking to discover from her
representative human nature, the limits of man’s powers and intimations of his destiny. And she boldly confesses:

   My mind became the book though which I grew

   Wise in all human wisdom, and its cave,

   Which like mine I rifled through and through,

   To me the keeping of its secrets gave –

   One mind, the type of all, (VII – XXX 3100-04)

   And thus Cythna courageously overcomes the ‘oppressive’ powers once when she is sure of that ‘one mind, the type of all’ that transcends all man-made differences and takes man and women to a plane of equality and harmonious co-existence and happy survival. Gender and gender-related questions, shade into ‘empty nothings’. This is the process through which both Shelley and Bharathi as forerunners of womanism seek to abolish gender based domestic oppression/subjugation. They create a new domestic paradigm. They neglect the myth that certain domestic chores belong only to women and that their rightful place is the home arena alone. They both portray the valourous character of women, where they voice against the violence enforced on them. God has gifted women with compassion, tender heartedness, caring nature and concern for others. But as builders of ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ both Shelley and Bharathi don’t think these qualities are the exclusive domain of women and that success, fame, intelligence, adventure, freedom etc are the prerogatives of men alone.
2.6. Basic Womanist Dictum

According to Simone de Beauvoir, until two partners do not recognize each other as equals, there can never flourish a healthy interaction. And the act of love becomes an illusion and frustration. She articulates this idea in a telling manner.

We have seen that it is possible to avoid the temptations of sadism and masochism when the two partners recognize each other as equals; if both the man and the woman have a little modesty and some generosity, ideas of victory and defeat are abolished; the love becomes a free exchange (701).

The basic womanist dictum is that women must build up a culture of freedom, even though the price may be quite exacting. Beatrice in *The Cenci* wants to free herself from her brutish father Cenci at the cost of her life. In this revolt against the tyrant she loses her life. In *The Revolt of Islam*, Cythna with Laon sacrifices herself that people may in future lead free and fruitful lives. Bharathi’s Pāñcāli stands for justice in the Court of Dhuryodhana and she was about to go the extreme of collapsing. Bharathi’s “*Putumaip Pen* [The New Woman] is another example that she was bold enough to declare in the men dominating world that “They are mad, we are told, who would enslave / Human beings endowed with reason” (3). And she vows to “Destroy all the hoary lies” and to “lay down all the stupid blocks” (9).

Shelley and Bharathi invert the male supremacy by creating a new trajectory of feminine responsibility. Asia in *Prometheus Unbound*, Cythna in
The Revolt in Islam and Beatrice in The Cenci have got newer track than the other women of their age. Bharathi’s women take upon themselves the responsibility of learning “the various arts and crafts” (8). She is ready to travel all over the world to “bring novelties home” (8). With “a straight look and an upright gait” (7), she goes with “pride arising from mature knowledge” (7), she is ready for “Many and many a deed” (9) to do. She is “to transform and renew our world” (10) and “to make all men immortal like gods” (10).

The women characters of Shelley and Bharathi possess in larger abundance the spiritual gift of empowering others in great measure. Shelley’s Emilia in “Epipsychidian”, the Witch in “The Witch of Atlas”, Cythna in The Revolt of Islam and Beatrice in The Cenci are great forces and have influence on others. In the same way Bharathi’s Kannamma, Kuyil, Pudumaip Peñ, Chellamma, and the women in Kummi Dance (“Peñka Viṭutalaik Kummi”) are the women who strengthen the other womenfolk. Bharathi’s spirit of womanism is in full flow in his song “Glory of Womanhood” (Peñmai). He proclaims victory to women and rejoices in the praising of wedded love (4), and “She is the solvent of sorrow” (2). She is “Holy Mother” (2) and it is the “Mother’s milk that gives us strength” (3) and the wife’s kind words reap our harvest of fame (3). Her “blessedness blasts all evil” (3). He asks to blow the conch and dance in joy to sing that “woman is sweeter than life” (6) and “she’s the protectress of life and creatrix too” (6). Thus he celebrates womanhood to the beat of the drum and to the tune of the golden flute.
According to Alice Walker, one essential element of womanism is the sense of community which plays a very supportive role in sustaining people who are under coercion. In *In Search of our Mother’s Gardens*, Walker postulates that Womanism is “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (“Preface” xi).

The spirit of womanism is seen is everywhere in Bharathi’s poems. Like Shelley, he believes in the potency and charm of poetry. With her aid, one may work a revolution in the hearts of men. And through poetry he consistently championed the cause of women’s liberation. In this, he was far ahead of his times. He envisioned women dancing in a circle clapping hands to tune and sing that “The New Woman” can “make the laws” (6) and “rule the realms” (6) and women do not lag behind man in knowledge he has. Bharathi advocates that women must have “a straight look and an upright gait, / Brows that fear none on the earth” (7). He stresses a women’s duty is to spit on the darkness of ignorance.

Bharathi’s innate love for freedom was fostered by the very atmosphere in which he lived. In “The Kummi of Women’s Freedom” (“Peŋkal Viṭutalaik Kummi”), he presaged the dawn of a new era of freedom for the neglected women folk.

Gone are they who said to women: ‘Thou shall not
Open the Book of Knowledge’.

And the strange ones who boasted saying:
‘We will immure these women in our homes’-

Today they hang down their leads. (2)

Bharathi was so critical of those social norms that prescribed one code for the male and another for the female:

And the talk of wedded faith,

Good, let it be binding on both;

But the custom that forces us to used we’ve

Cast it down and trample it underfoot. (5)

Bharathi attributed the natural traits of wisdom, virtue, freedom and courage to women. He took the role of futurologist to emphasize the point that ultimate over-all development of the world will best be ensured through equal participation of men and women. According to him women should be treated in high reverence and those who degrade her should he burnt. Bharathi becomes ironical when he catalogues the ills meted out to women. His “The Kummi of Women’s Freedom” is a good illustration of this (400). Whenever Bharathi gets an opportunity, he treats his ‘pet’ subject forcefully and effectively.

Bharathi often felt that all the negative qualities under which women laboured could be removed at one stroke through proper education. Womanism did not leave him a mere idealist because he practised at home, what he preached abroad. He not only gave good education to his two daughters, thus removing them from the orthodox shelter of the Hindu home,
but allowed to mingle freely with all (V. Arasu 41). They enjoyed unprecedented freedom even to the extent of addressing reformist meetings.

Bharathi in his essays, too, was concerned with the status of women during his age and in his poems with their role in the future. His “New Women” is a blending of the old and the new; and with her passion for reforms, she is a revolutionary woman (324).

2.7. Differing Perceptions

Shelley was against the institution of marriage as a tie unnecessary between those who love one another and unnecessary between those who do not. To him love is free and he propagated free love (797). Shelley remarks in the “Notes” on Queen Mab that: “A system could not well have been devised more studiously hostile to human happiness than marriage” (797). He points out in “Epipsychidion” as

. . . Narrow

The heart that loves, the brain that contemplates,

The life that weaves the spirit that creates

One object, and one form, and builds thereby

A sepulcher for its eternity. (169-173)

According to Shelley, to love only one person is something which only a narrow heart could do. He is of the opinion that chastity is foolish, it will destroy the root of all domestic happiness. In the “Note” of Queen Mab he has sung: “Love is free: to promise forever to love the same woman is not less / Absurd than to promise to believe the same creed” (797).
Even though Bharathi is an ardent follower of Shelley, he was fully aware of the rotten consequences of free love. He was also equally fully aware of the concept of free-love as propagated by Godwin and Shelley. It is true that Bharathi assimilated Shelley’s views on woman. It is also true that they both had similar views on woman, but he opposed vehemently the concept of free love as held by Shelley. And in this regard Bharathi does not stand with Shelley to castigate the institution of marriage. He condemns free love in various essays. He affirms this doctrine in his poem entitled “Free Love” (Viṭutalaikkātal). His anger is very strong as Bharathi criticizes free love. According to him “Free love is false love, utterly false” (56). He asserts it is an immoral activity which will demoralize the society. For Bharathi love is divine. In “In Praise of Love” (Kātalin Pukaḷci) he sings: “By love are men able to have union; / By union are men, truly rid of worries” (49) and “Lo, the beloved wife is indeed Sakti / And Godhead is to be attained through her” (50). So his love for women is one’s love for his wife. And he advocates love at home between a husband and a wife. According to him love of a wife has a miraculous power. In his poem “Evening (A Love Song)”, Bharathi sings in praise of Love:

Life springs and leaps on mount of honour bright.

Wisdom grows

And on earth poetry glows. (25-27)
Bharathi values chastity very much and he places this virtue equally for both men and women. He clearly states this in his poem, “The Kummi of Women’s Freedom”.

Even though *The Cenci* has an interesting parallel in vow as in *The Oath of Pāñcāli* there is a dissimilarity also. The hapless Pāñcāli makes a heart-rending, but vain appeal, to the wise and the good and pious among the courtiers of Duryodhana to save her from public humiliation and disgrace at the hands of a tyrant.

She whimpered and lamented again:

“In this assembly great there are men of vast learning
And men of great renown; also are here Brahmins,
Masters of many yagas; there are great ones besides,
Why are they all weak and meak
Unmoved by righteous indignation?” (33 -38)

Beatrice makes a similar hopeless appeal to the guests of her father to rescue her from the domestic tyrant.

I do entreat you, go not, noble guests;

What, although tyranny and impious hate
Stand sheltered by a father’s hoary hair?

What, if ‘tis he who clothed us in these limbs
Who fortunes them, and triumphs? (I. III. 99-103)

Again she cries:

Dare no one look on me?
None answer? can one tyrant overbear

The sense of many best and wisest men. (I. III. 133-35)

The two identical situations present one tragic phase in the history of human civilization. When the world neglects dharma and encourages dharma, innocence is trampled on by tyranny with impunity. When men lose their reason, justice flees to “brutish beasts”. But the two dramas present two different visions of life, one optimistic and the other pessimistic. The triumph of Duryodhana is short lived and the honour of Pāṇcāli is indicated. Nemesis overtakes him. But Beatrice, pure and innocent, is sacrificed to the tyranny of man-made institutions.

In the beginning of the play The Cenci, Shelley portrays Beatrice as a pious lady like Pāṇcāli. In moments of adversity, she is quite confident about the helping hands of God and remains silent there saying “there is a God in Heaven” (I. III. 52). She even advises her to seek father way for redemption and says

Bow thy white head before offended God,

And we will kneel around, and fervently

Pray that he pity both ourselves and thee. (I. III. 157-59)

The helping hands of God rescues Bharathi’s heroine in moments of adversity whereas to the heroine of the atheist Shelley it fails to help her when she was in agony. And she laments:

Forbearance and respect, remorse and fear

And all the fit restraints of daily life,
Which have been borne from childhood, but which now
Would be a mockery to my holier plea. (III: 1.209-12)

When Pāñcāli was brought to court by Dushashana, Karnan asserts that Pāñcāli being a slave, should not cover her breast with clothes and asks Dushashana to undress her. At this pitiable moment, she forgets herself, mingles with the Absolute in her prayers to Lord Krishna by whose mercy saris come incessantly from her body which makes Dushashana fail in his attempt. Bharathi had a strong faith in Providence. So his character, like the author, feels no sense of loneliness even though her husband has lost Pāñcāli in gambling. She believes, she is saved by Lord Krishna in the end. But for Beatrice, her prayers proved futile. Her’s is completely a spiritual alienation even betrayed by God. She cries:

My pangs are of the mind, and of the heart,
And of the soul; ay, of the in most soul,
Which weeps within tears as of burning gall
To see, in this ill world where none are true. (V. III. 65-68)

2.8. Womanism and Sexual Equality

Shelley and Bharathi have created women who are bold to revolt against the society. Shelley was the first poet to accept the modern views on ‘sexual equality’. Bharathi was more dear in his womanist concept than his predecessor Shelley. Shelley’s Cythna and Beatrice occupy a prominent place and play a dominant role. Bharathi’s ‘New Woman’ has no story or she is not
a character like Cythna. But Bharathi reports the words and actions of his ‘New Woman’.

Bharathi praises her deeds in glowing terms. Yet in spirit and action she stands very close and sometimes far above to Shelley’s Cythna. Shelley’s Laon celebrates the spirit and action of Cythna first like Bharathi of his ‘New Woman’. Both Cythna and the New Woman ridicule and are ready to burst and break the bondage of the oppressors and prepared to burn the chains of slavery. Bharathi sees his ‘New Woman’ in Shelley’s Mary Shelley. He admires her heroic qualities and her free will. Both Cythna and the New Woman preach the gospel of liberty, since they both are the incarnation of Divine power. They assume that they have a great duty of making this world prosper by means of education, with science and poetry. But all characters, both in Shelley and Bharathi, act and live and perform in a universe governed by the womanist principle of each (man and woman) taking the other as partner in the great task of liberation of the ‘Woman - Other’ rather than each alienating the ‘Other’ as a rival and enemy in fighting for one’s rights, and rights for survival and sustenance. And thus Shelley and Bharathi reveal themselves as pioneering womanists in their literary creations as well as in their personal lives.

Now, the various women images, or images of women, that one comes across in the whole body of both Shelley and Bharathi’s creations, when looked at from a womanist perspective largely border on the ever-deepening
domain of women as home-makers, women as the beauteous and the brave, women as liberators/leaders and women as goddesses/deities.

Liberation begins at home. And women’s liberation begins at ‘women’s home’. As a home-maker, a woman launches her unswerving voyage of freedom and victory. It is woman, the beauteous and the brave, takes on the adventurous odyssey for her empowerment. And, in the process, the woman occupies the role of the liberator or a leader. A liberator or leader is naturally transcended to the level of a deity, evidently symbolizing the continuation of the incessant, unending and perennial journey of liberation and freedom for equality and justice in the elevated/exalted status of a goddess, an image that represents the inner dynamics of a liberated woman in herself becoming the presiding deity of liberating the entire womankind. Thus one may not fail to see an evolution of the woman images from those of a home-maker, through the beauteous and the brave, and the liberator on the ladder reaching the pinnacle of at once meaningful and ideal deification of the woman as a goddess, the preserver, protector, provider and above all the promoter of women’s status as an independent human-person, enjoying equality with the man.

The following chapters are thus devoted to an exhaustive discussion of each type of image, Woman image, as projected and propounded in and through the works as well as characters of Shelley and Bharathi. And the next chapter takes up for discussion the image of woman as home-maker.