CHAPTER II
FEMINISM and BEYOND

No research study can avoid some theoretical basis. Working on women characters by women writers invariably means working within the theoretical perspective of feminism even if the chosen writers are not necessarily feminists. As there are diverse regions, religions, castes, etc., one cannot have one particular theory of Indian feminism. Nevertheless, when we talk about feminism in India we have to place it necessarily in the larger context of Western feminism to understand how far it is similar or dissimilar to it.

The term ‘feminism’ is derived from the Latin word ‘femina’, meaning woman. The Oxford Dictionary defines this term as a movement or theory supporting women’s rights on the grounds of equality of the sexes. The New Encyclopaedia Britannica defines the women’s movement “as a social movement concerned with changing the roles of women” (Encyclopaedia, 1974, 732). It embraces widely varying organisations, individuals, and ideas ranging from the call for moderate reforms of society to those advocating radical changes. All share a common view that women must be free to decide their own careers and life patterns.

Whatever attempts that are made to define feminism, it is clear that it is not one unitary concept, instead a diverse and multifaceted grouping of ideas, and indeed, actions. Feminism, as Delmar has pointed out, has historically been heterogeneous. In an attempt at some kind of classification, histories of feminism in the West have talked about the historical appearance of strong feminist movements as a series of
‘waves’. Thus ‘first wave’ feminism is used to refer to the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century feminist movements that were concerned with gaining equal rights for women, particularly the right of suffrage. A decline of feminism was seen between 1920 and 1960. Feminism became a dead history in Britain and America after 1920 with the women winning the final right to vote. The Depression and the political turmoil between the two World Wars were the objective factors that pushed to the background the women’s movement from 1920 to 1960. ‘Second wave’ feminism refers to the resurgence of feminist activity in the late 1960s and 1970s when protest again centred on women’s inequality, although this time not only in terms of women’s lack of equal political rights, but in the areas of family, sexuality and work. It is during this era that the media myths such as “bra burning” and the “freedom trash can” into which were thrown “objects of female torture” such as dishcloths, high heels, etc., was born. Second wave feminism highlighted four important demands, equal pay, equal education and opportunity, 24-hour nurseries, free contraception and abortion. ‘Third wave’ feminism is a term identified with several diverse strains of feminist activity and study from 1990 to the present. It took off with the realisation that the heterogeneity of women belonging to different nationalities, ethnic groups, races and cultures was not reckoned with by the second wave. There was no all- encompassing single feminist idea in this wave, but was a coalescing of diverse aims. Feminists in this age would prefer that women represent themselves as fundamentally strong, confident, brave individuals, and bring themselves to the table for a greater integration into politics, economics, courtrooms, and social forums. Thus, feminism over the decades has had different ramifications and complexities, but still has consistently worked towards the welfare of women.
Feminist literary theory has evolved according to the needs and demands of the international women’s movement. Feminist literature and criticism is an offspring of the feminist movement, which has been steadily gathering momentum in the twentieth century. The suffrage activity, the entry of women into the work force during and after the world wars, the disintegration of the traditional roles of man and woman as bread-winner and home-maker, the consequent strain on family relationships- all these have contributed to a new image of woman and a new self-awareness in women. Feminist criticism also attempts to study the effect of society and environment on the work of women writers. Many feminists in the West have contributed to the growth of feminism all over the world. Feminist literary theories have been collated based on the texts, *Feminist Social Thought* by Vidyut Bhagwat and Jasbir Jain’s *Women Writing: Text and Context*. Mary Wollstonecraft has been called the “first feminist” or “mother of feminism”. Her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is a classic of feminist thought which is an essay on women’s rights, - especially on women’s education. She believes that only through education the emancipation would come. She goes on to argue that educating women will strengthen the marriage relationship. According to her, a stable marriage is a partnership between a husband and a wife. Therefore, a woman needs to have equal knowledge and sense to maintain the partnership. Moreover, a stable marriage also provides for the proper education of children. In her book, she makes her position clear: only when woman and man are equally free, and woman and man are equally dutiful in exercise of their responsibilities to family and state, can there be true freedom. In order to reform and necessitate such equality, she recommends, equal and quality education for woman- an education which recognises her duty to educate her own children, to be an equal partner with her husband in the family and which
recognises that the woman, like man, is a creature of both thought and feeling: a creature of reason.

Virginia Woolf’s essay *A Room of One’s Own* is a landmark in twentieth century feminist thought. It explores the history of women in literature through an unconventional and highly provocative investigation of the social and material conditions required for the writing of literature. She has made a famous statement in this book: “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (Woolf, 13). What she insists is that women should be economically independent and should have some private space for themselves. Woolf examined the obstacles and prejudices that have hindered women writers. She also goes on to expose the gender-consciousness that she believes cripples both male and female writers. She even observes that most men derogate women to maintain their own superiority, and most women are angry and insecure about their inferior status in society. She does not want to put all the blame on men. This is clearly brought out in the mirror image that the author uses in this context: “Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the power of man at twice its natural size” (Woolf, 44). The woman too is responsible for the creation of the inflated image of the ruling patriarch, and in this way she has contributed to her own oppression. According to her, a writer of genius rises beyond his or her petty gripes and not the writer’s self. Instead of looking upon the other gender as an antagonist, Woolf emphasises the need for men and women to live and move in perfect co-operation. She states, “Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine” (Woolf, 103). Therefore,
she argues that a writer should be androgynous and states that when this fusion takes place the mind is fully fertilised and uses all its faculties.

Simone de Beauvoir’s, *The Second Sex*, coming about twenty years after *A Room of One’s Own* gave a fresh impetus to the feminist movement. It is considered one of the most important books ever written about the subjugation of women. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir establishes the importance of woman’s questioning of her social and intellectual milieu. She feels that, most of the definitions of ‘woman’s nature’ come from male thinkers. She remarks: “The whole of feminine history being man-made […] men have always held the lot of women in their hands and they have determined what it should be, not according to her interests, but rather with regard to their projects, their fears and their needs” (Beauvoir, 128). From Aristotle, all have defined women as secondary, inferior, and relative to man. Beauvoir remarks:

> Man has defined himself as the absolute, the Norm, and woman as the ‘other’. Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. (Beauvoir, 15)

Beauvoir finds it surprising that though man has treated woman as the ‘other’, woman has never resisted nor reacted in the most natural way by turning man into the ‘other’ for her. This unwillingness to resist this situation further reduces her status. Ultimately, Beauvoir feels that woman herself is held responsible for accepting an inferior status and holding a secondary status. She feels that women will have to emerge out of the designated position and struggle for her freedom. She emphasises the need for women to write about their experiences for they alone can tell the meaning of being a woman in a patriarchal society. She says,
We know the feminine world, more intimately than the men, because we have our roots in it, we grasp more immediately than do men what it means to be a human being, to be feminine and we are more concerned with such knowledge. (Beauvoir, 26)

Beauvoir’s observation, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (Beauvoir, 295) has become famous in feminist literature and sows the seed to subsequent analysis of feminity:

No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch which is described as feminine. (Beauvoir, 295)

At the end of the analysis, she draws a conclusion that man and woman relationship will be profoundly altered for the better, if their relations are based on equal footing. She emphasises the importance of family ties when she says, “To emancipate woman is to refuse to chain her to the relation she bears to man, not to deny them to her” (Beauvoir, 740).

The pace of feminism quickened with Betty Friedan’s, *The Feminine Mystique* published in 1963. It is an outstanding sociological study- an overdue challenge to the mercenary mythmakers who have invented the glorified image of the Happy Housewife Heroine and imposed it on American women. Friedan declared that American women were becoming increasingly unhappy with their lot in post-war society. She found that these women were suffering from ‘a problem that has no name’ – could be a problem of ‘housewife’s fatigue’ or ‘boredom’. She declared that domesticity was not a satisfactory condition for an intelligent and career-aspiring
woman. She held women’s magazines, advertisements, and Freudian psychology as responsible for advocating that American women could achieve happiness only through marriage and motherhood. She labelled this ideology Feminine Mystique which she defined as, “the strange discrepancy between the realities of our lives as women and the image which we are trying to conform” (Freidan, 9). She felt that American women were put under tremendous pressure as the feminine mystique “encourages women to ignore the question of their identity” (Freidan, 71) thereby ensuring that they had “no private image” (Freidan, 75). Friedan exhorted women to break through the feminine mystique and take themselves seriously. The book had a powerful effect and helped women to realise that they could lead a fruitful, creative life apart from domesticity.

Mary Ellmann’s, *Thinking about Women* (1968) and Kate Millet’s, *Sexual Politics* (1970) were path-breaking texts heralding feminist literary criticism. Both argued that images of women in male-authored texts do not reflect the real female experience. On the contrary, they reflect the misogynist stereotypes of women. Ellmann’s, *Thinking about Women* is the basic source for what is called ‘images of women criticism’. Written with a lot of wit and humour, Ellmann looks for female stereotypes in male-authored literature. She identifies eleven major stereotypes of femininity as presented by male writers and critics and asserts that, “not only sexual terms but sexual opinions are imposed upon the external world. All forms are subsumed by our concepts of male and female temperaments” (Ellmann, 9).

Kate Millet, with her classic feminist text, *Sexual Politics* (1970), took the world by storm with her radical feminist theory of sexual politics. Thereafter, almost
every other feminist critic used a similar yardstick to judge the literary characters from a literary standpoint.

Millet’s definition of sexual politics is “power structured relationship […] whereby one group of persons is controlled by another” (Millet, 23). Millet analyses sexual power politics in the works of D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, and Jean Jenet. She takes up passages from the works of these authors whom she considers sexist to show how the tone and the language indicate the dominance of the male. She refers to these authors as “the counter revolutionary sexual politicians” (Millet, 233). Millet in her analyses also takes up the eight factors that influence patriarchy. Declaring that “patriarchy has God on its side” (Millet, 57), Millet calls for the re-examination of the traits categorised as ‘masculine’ (intelligence, aggressive and force) and ‘feminine’ (domicility and passivity), and asserts that only a sexual revolution would bring the institution of patriarchy to an end.

Since Anglo-American literary theories are preponderantly male-dominated, feminist critics from the 1970s focussed on the works of women writers. They turned to women’s writings, studying authors such as Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters, George Eliot, and Virginia Woolf.

In the late 1970s, three major studies on women writers were published which tried to reconstruct a female literary tradition in British and American literature and history, namely, Ellen Moers’s, *Literary Women* (1976), Elaine Showalter’s, *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s, *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979). These books were welcomed enthusiastically, as they
were the long-awaited major studies on women writers, which have now become the modern classics of feminist approach to literature.

Moers’s, *Literary Women*, delineates the development of many British, American, and French women writers. It is the first attempt by a feminist to depict women’s writing as running alongside the mainstream male tradition. Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own* traces a female literary tradition in the English novel from the Brontes to the present day, and demonstrates that the development of this tradition is similar to the development of any literary sub-culture. She discovers three major phases of historical development which she claims to all literary movements:

First, there is a prolonged phase of imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and internalization of its standards of art and its views on social roles. Second, there is a phase of protest against these standards and values, including a demand for autonomy. Finally, there is a phase of self-discovery, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity. An appropriate terminology for women writers is to call these stages feminine, feminist, and female. (Showalter, 1977, 13)

In *Towards a Feminist Poetics*, Showalter elaborates that during the feminine phase, dating from 1840 to 1880, women wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture, and internalised its assumptions about female nature. A national characteristic of English women writers of choosing male pseudonym became a trend in England in the 1840s, as a way of coping with a double literary standard. This masculine disguise exerts an irregular pressure on the narrative, affecting tone, diction, structure, and characterisation.
In the feminist phase, from about 1880 to 1920, or the winning of vote, women are historically enabled to reject the accommodating postures of femininity and to use literature to dramatise the ordeals of wronged womanhood. The personal sense of injustice which feminine novelists such as Elizabeth Gaskell and Frances Trollope expressed in their novels of class struggle and factory life become increasingly and explicitly feminist in the 1880s, when a generation of New Women redefined the woman artist’s role in terms of responsibility to suffering sisters. (Showalter, 1979, 35-36)

In the female phase, ongoing since 1920, women reject both imitation and protest - two forms of dependency and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature. Representatives of the formal Female Aesthetic, such as Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf, begin to think in terms of male and female sentences, and divide their work into ‘masculine’ journalism and ‘feminine’ fictions, redefining and sexualising external and internal experience. (Showalter, 36)

Another text which enjoys a privileged status in feminist circles is The Mad Woman in an Attic (1979) by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. This book aims to describe the “distinctively female tradition” of the nineteenth century and also to propound a complex theory of women’s creativity. The author argues that since creativity is defined as male in the patriarchal culture, the woman writer of the nineteenth century suffers from an intense anxiety of authorship. She possesses a distinctive female power or voice, but can give expression to it only in an indirect manner. That is why she creates the female stereotypes of angel and monster as male writers have done, but in creating these she subverts and revises them.

Gilbert and Gubar conclude that, “In projecting their anger and dis-ease into dreadful figures, creating dark doubles for themselves and their heroines, women writers are both identifying with and revising the self-definitions patriarchal culture has imposed on them” (Gilbert and Gubar, 79). The angel, the monster, the sweet
heroine and the raging mad woman are all aspects of the author’s self-images. This critical approach puts forth the view that a real woman is hidden behind the patriarchal textual façade, and it is the task of the feminist critics to lay bare the truth.

As pointed out by Delmar, feminism has historically been heterogeneous. It has different classifications with so many different analyses, rhetoric, strategies and different ideologies governing the women’s movement which adds different prefixes to ‘feminism’ like liberal, radical, Marxist, social, equity, cyber, etc.

**Liberal Feminism:** According to the liberalist, “it is the government’s duty to ensure economic justice and promote the values of equality, liberty and fraternity among all its citizens” (C. Jose, 22). Liberal feminism focuses on women’s ability to show and maintain their equality through their own actions and choices. Mary Wollstonecraft observed that women, especially the upper class, did not allow their talents and intelligence to turn into productive labour at home or outside. However, as mothers, women could have influenced the society, by getting educated and taking charge of their own destinies as well as those of their dependents. Liberal feminism received its classical expression in John Stuart Mill’s, *The Subjection of Women*. Its main argument is that a woman should be able to determine her social role with the similar freedom as a man. Liberal feminists claimed that this involves the liberation of men too from the entire responsibility of supporting their families or defending their country.

**Radical Feminism:** Radical feminism is about changing the existing power relations between men and women through a social and biological revolution. Formulated by Atkinson and Shulamith Firestone, it claims that child bearing makes women
dependent on men for physical survival and therefore women’s liberation requires a biological revolution. The technique of artificial reproduction could relieve women from the basic inequality of bearing and rearing children. This could lead to the abolition of the institution of family which will ultimately end all kinds of sexual oppression. Therefore, this feminism aims to challenge and overthrow patriarchy by opposing standard gender roles and oppression of women and calls for a radical reordering of society.

**Marxist Feminism:** Marxist feminism focuses on the dismantling of capitalism as a way of liberating women. It states that private property, which gives rise to economic inequality, dependence, political confusion, and ultimately, unhealthy social relations between men and women, is the root of women’s oppression in the present social context. Engels in his analysis of gender oppression in “The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State” claims that a woman’s subordination is not a result of her biologic disposition but of social relations, and that the institution of family as it exists is a complex system in which men command women’s services. Therefore, women must enter the public industry in order to escape exploitation within the family. Women can become economically independent by socialising housework and nurturance and when they become economically independent, her status in the household and in the world at large will also change.

**Socialist Feminism:** This feminism focuses upon both the public and private spheres of a woman’s life and argues that liberation can be achieved only by working to end both the economic and cultural sources of women’s oppression. Socialist feminism’s theory broadens Marxist feminism’s argument for the role of capitalism in the
oppression of women and radical feminism’s theory of the role of gender and the patriarchy. They assert that women are unable to be free, due to their financial dependence on males in society. In order to be fully liberated, women must be empowered to free themselves of the economic control of capitalism and the psychological slavery of patriarchy.

**Cyber Feminism:** This is a feminist community, philosophy and set of practices concerned with feminist interactions with and acts in cyber space. Cyber feminists resist rigid definitions of their movement, but are broadly concerned with expressing and developing feminism in the context of online interactions and online art.

**Equity and Gender Feminism:** These are terms coined by Christina Hoff Sommers in her 1992 book “Who Stole Feminism?” which she uses to distinguish between what she describes as two ideological branches of modern feminism. She describes Equity feminism as an ideology rooted in classical liberalism, and that aims for full civil and legal equality for women. Experimental psychologist Steven Pinker expands on Sommers to write, “Equity feminism is a moral doctrine about equal treatment that makes no commitments regarding open empirical issues in psychology or biology.”

**Feminism - Indian Context**

Many feel that the Western theories with its liberal and radical views rejecting marriage and motherhood seem to be unsuitable to the women in the Indian context. We can note that Indian feminist researchers or women studies researchers have not yet been able to define “Indian Feminism”. Unlike Western feminism, Indians do not
have any clear-cut corpus of writing which can categorically be referred to as “feminism” or “feminist writing/theory”. Therefore, a theoretical approach may be derived only through the historical approach to Indian feminism. Looking into the pre-colonial structures and women’s role in them one can understand that feminism was theorised differently in India than in the West. For the same reason Partha Chatterji says, “Colonial essentialization of “Indian culture” and reconstruction of Indian womanhood as the epitome of that culture through social reform movements resulted in political theorization in the form of nationalism rather than as feminism alone” (Chatterji, 2004).

The first phase of feminism in India is marked by the period between 1850 and 1915. Unlike the western feminist movement, India’s feminist movement was started by men and later on was joined by women. Influential men like Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshav Chandrasen, Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, Malabari Phule, and Mahadev Govind Ranade were involved in this movement. Pandita Ramabai’s presence was distinct as the woman leader of the women’s cause. Savitri Bai, Phule’s wife was the other woman who figured on the scenes of women’s emancipation in that stage. This first phase of feminism in India was initiated to uproot the social evils of Sati (widow immolation), to allow widow remarriage, to forbid child marriage, and to reduce illiteracy, as well as to regulate the age of consent and to ensure property rights through legal intervention. In this phase, women were not recognised as autonomous agents of change but were categorised along with lower castes as subjects of social reforms and welfare. The women involved were those related to male activists, elite, western educated and upper caste Hindus.
With the advent of the Nationalist movement, the Feminist movement in India blended with the Reformist and Nationalist movements. In the second phase of feminism in India the period between 1915 and 1947, the struggle against the colonial rule intensified. Women came out of their home to involve themselves in the freedom movement. Gandhi legitimized and expanded Indian women’s public activities by initiating them into the non-violent civil disobedience movement against the British Raj. He exalted their feminine roles of caring, self-abnegation, sacrifice and tolerance, creating a special place for those in public space. Women organisations like the All India Women’s Conference (AIWC) and the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) emerged focusing on the issues relating to the scope of women’s political participation, women’s franchise, communal awards, and leadership roles in political parties.

Women’s participation in the freedom struggle made them conscious about their role and rights in independent India. This resulted in the introduction of the franchise and civic rights of women in the Indian Constitution. Provision even was made for women’s upliftment through affirmative action, maternal health and child care (crèches), equal pay for equal work, etc. The truth is that women in India did not have to struggle for basic rights as did women in the West.

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed the growth of numerous women’s groups that took up issues such as dowry deaths, bride burning, rape, Sati, and focussed on violence against women. They stressed the sexual oppression of women and questioned the patriarchal assumptions underlying women’s role in the family and society based on the biological sex differences, the public political sphere being the
male domain and the private familial sphere as that of the female which eventually means a domination of male over female. Based on such a dichotomous perception of male and female roles, women find themselves in a secondary role, sometimes leading to humiliation, torture and violence even within the family. Women also participated in several agitations like anti-alcohol, anti-price rise, Chipko movement, campaign against rape, anti-dowry campaign etc., bringing in change in the laws. But to implement these laws and to make women aware of their rights, education and literacy was necessary. Therefore, the women’s movement realised the need to take up programmes of legal literacy and education, gender sensitisation of text books and media.

The contemporary women’s movement provided the impetus for the establishment and growth of women’s studies across disciplines. The last few years have seen the broadening and expansion of the movement to take in a whole range of issues. Women’s organisations not only lead campaigns but also run shelters for battered wives and women who are victims of violence and provide counselling and legal aid. They also help in forming self-help groups (SHG) to make women economically self-reliant. The success of the women’s movement is visible in the way it has brought about a new consciousness on the entire question of women in Indian society.

At this juncture, it seems imperative to briefly highlight the features of change in the role and position of women in India with its changing socio-cultural tradition. The features of change have been collated here based on the text, *Status of Women in Changing Urban Hindu Family* by Dr. Sangeetha Mishra. The position of women in
any society is a significant pointer to the level of cultural progress of that society. It has been affected by progressive or reactionary trend which prevailed in the society. Indian society, in its state of flux has experienced changes in social organisation, in social relations between its various component parts, and also in ideology. The status of woman as a vital aspect of Indian society also reflected similar changes.

To begin with the Vedic period, woman in the Vedic Age seems to have enjoyed a comparatively higher status than that enjoyed by her sisters in the post-Vedic age. She was the very centre of the domestic world and was its empress. As far as education is concerned, the position of women was generally equal to that of men. Women took part in philosophic debates like men and with men practised penances, performed the sacrifices in the absence of their husbands, and moved about freely in the public. All these show that man and woman were regarded as having equally important status in the social life of the early period. Even in the matter of selecting her partner, she seemed to exercise a good deal of influence. There were also references to marriage which were of Gandharva form in which one’s choice played an important part. Besides, a widow was allowed to contract a second marriage.

During the post-Vedic period, a lot of changes happened. Manu introduced new privileges to Brahmins and conceded an inferior status to sudras and women. Swayamvara form of marriage was prevalent among the royal families. Women were deprived of the right over family property. They were assigned only domestic duties. Thus, the freedom of movement which women enjoyed during the Vedic period was
steadily and increasingly suppressed. This period became the formative period of women’s subordination.

Even during the Buddhist period women enjoyed great freedom and equality in the sphere of religion. The education of women was also taken care of. The relationship between husband and wife was that of mutual respect though the husband’s status being superior. The presence of a widow was not regarded as inauspicious. The right of admission to the religious order generated self-confidence among women.

During the Puranic period, the Puranic writers contented that the husband is god for the woman and devotion to him is equivalent to man’s devotion to God. This was an era of the increasing subjection of woman. The Puranas laid great stress on depriving the freedom for girls to choose to remain unmarried for the whole life. Society and religion of the period inexorably fixed a single life aim for her namely, a domestic lifelong married existence. This period not only prohibited widow remarriage, but also the horrible practice of sati was more and more eulogised as an ideal. Child marriage became rampant, girl’s education was absolutely nil, and the previous practice of widow remarriage declined.

The invasion by the Muslims on our country brought about further deterioration of the position of woman in the post-Puranic period. As the rights and freedom of women were curtailed further, this period is termed as one of the darkest periods for woman in Indian history. But during the Bhakti movement some improvement was seen in the status of lower castes and women. Many women saints
appeared in the Hindu social world during the Bhakti movement due to the crusade of the Bhaktas to secure right of freedom of direct worship of God and thereby attain salvation for women. Many women saints like Mira, Jani, Muktabai, Ksema and Gangubai emerged as leaders of a religious mass movement working towards social freedom for women.

When the Britishers came to India the position of the Indian woman had reached the maximum degree of deterioration. Ideologically woman was considered an inferior species, inferior to the male, having no significance and no personality. Socially she was kept in a state of utter subjection, deprived of any rights, suppressed and oppressed. She had no independent status as a member of the family or society. She was considered unworthy of education. Her space was restricted to the domestic sphere. She was virtually considered as a non-entity- a slave. The birth of a daughter was not considered an occasion for happiness. The sons were given more preference and rights, especially in the matters of food, clothing, education, etc. The daughters were often married without their consent. In the house of the husband, their status became even worse. The husband, the in-laws, and the other members of the family considered the daughter-in-law as a servant of the family, whose only duty was to obey everyone, to wake up early and to sleep late, to eat whatever remains after others have eaten, and not to complain about it to anyone. The condition of the widows was worse for she was not given any share in the property of her husband nor was any one prepared to marry her; but the males of the household tried to sexually exploit her secretly. She was helpless to oppose all this and when some bad consequence followed, the entire blame was put on the widow and she was turned out of the house. Thus the Indian woman, on the eve of the British rule had not only lost her
independence, but her sense and urge for freedom and consciousness of independent personality.

A new society based on new socio-economic relation and a new liberal democratic ideology was necessary for making woman conscious of her subjection, for realisation of her real role in society, for the growth of woman’s freedom in all spheres of life as also for great advance in the direction of her complete freedom (Desai, 1957, 31). The liberal Indians like Ranade, Dayanand Sarawati, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Vivekanand, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Annie Besant, etc. launched social reform movements for the liberation of Indian woman. On the basis of the achievements of these pioneers, women could evolve independent movements for their emancipation in the early twentieth century. Gandhiji by applying liberal standards to woman in all phases of life did a great service to her.

With the advent of women’s education in India and the influence of the West, together with the efforts of social reformers, the status of women in India changed for the better. With the achievement of freedom by India, she was given equal political rights. With the enactment of the Hindu Code, she was allowed equal rights in matters of inheritance, adoption of the child, divorce, and others.

During the post-independence era, educational opportunities for women increased, with a large number of women joining the work force and started enjoying economic independence. However, according to the report of the committee on the status of women, it is ironical that the equality granted by the Indian Constitution has not been translated into reality. The Indian society continues to be a male dominated
society, where woman is still a “second person”. Even an educated, job-oriented woman can pursue her career, only if she does not neglect her domestic duties. Though sex equality has been achieved legally, it is difficult to practise it socially. The belief that the biological and cultural roles of men and women are different is very strong in India.

Though the age-old problems of Indian women such as child marriage, Sati system, prohibition on widow re-marriage, devadasi system, etc. have disappeared, they have been replaced by a new set of problems such as atrocities against women, rape, dowry harassments and deaths, female infanticide, oppression and exploitation of ‘dalit’ and minority women, sexual harassment of women at work place, etc. A solution to all these problems of the modern times can be arrived at only if “women’s problems” are treated as “societal problems”.

Sociologists have found that women in India yearn for a ‘respectable’ and ‘meaningful’ social status which is free from all exploitation. Moreover, Indian women are not very keen to fight for equality with men. There is no intention in them to ‘outsmart’ men. But they expect a change in the attitude of men towards them and their status. What they expect is greater freedom, better education, self-dependence, a proper treatment of women by men folk, and a socio-economic environment free from all types of exploitation.
Kapil Kapoor suggests that:

As the Indian reality and context are crucially different and as India has a strong tradition, continuous and cumulative, of sociological thinking that has always taken into account the internal multiplicity and diversity of Hindu social reality and thus has been sensitive to the intrinsic non-absoluteness of sociological constructs, it is not only advisable but imperative to look into the whole question of construction and status of women by locating oneself in this Indian paradigm. (Kapoor, 28)

Besides tracing the women’s movement and the changing position of women in India, one has to look into the obstacles and difficulties in theorising feminism in India. As observed by Chaudhuri, “In India, feminism and nationalism were closely inter-linked… The women’s movement in India had none of the man-woman antagonism characteristic of woman’s movement in the West” (Chaudhuri, xxi). Historical circumstances and values in India make women’s issues different from the western feminist rhetoric. Through religion, the concept of women as “powerful” is accommodated into patriarchal culture (Singh, 2010). This has retained visibility in all sections of society, thereby, providing women with traditional “cultural spaces”. Moreover, in the West the notion of “self” rests in competitive individualism where people are described as “born free yet everywhere in chains”, whereas in India the individual is usually considered to be just one part of the larger social collective, dependent for its survival upon cooperation and self-denial for the greater good.

Indian feminist scholars and activists define feminism in time and space in order to avoid the blind following of Western ideas. Indian women negotiate survival through an array of oppressive patriarchal family structures: age, status, relationship to men through family of origin, marriage and procreation and also patriarchal attributes like dowry, begetting sons, etc., -kinship, caste, community, etc. However,
it should be noted that certain communities in India, exhibit matriarchal tendencies, with the head of the family being the oldest woman rather than the oldest man.

The heterogeneity of Indian experience reveals that there are multiple patriarchies and so also are multiple feminisms. Hence, feminism in India is not a singular theoretical orientation; it has changed over time in relation to historical and cultural realities, levels of consciousness, perceptions and actions of individual women and women as a group. According to Bhasin and Khan, the widely used definition of feminism is, “An awareness of women’s oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within the family, and conscious action by women and men to change this situation” (Bhasin and Khan, 1986).

The male and the female dichotomy of polar opposites with the former oppressing the latter at all times is refuted in the Indian context because it was men who initiated social reform movements against various social evils. The polytheistic Hindu Pantheon provides revered images of women as unique and yet complementary to those of male deities. In India, the concept of “equality” was completely unknown until liberally exposed western educated Indians introduced it in the early nineteenth century. It is only after the country gained independence and adopted a democratic government, the Indian Constitution granted equality and freedom. The concept of “feminism” is unique within the context of Indian culture and it cannot be directly compared to feminism in Western culture. Instead, this issue should be viewed as one of “human rights” within Indian context. In addition, whatever the characteristics that the western culture would label as forms of “oppression”, Indian women would rather define as forms of “sorrow”. Moreover, they are unlikely to be able to make the
distinction between sorrow and oppression. Their lives are ruled by the single word “compromise” and not “confrontation”, as is the situation in the west. The Western ideologies based on ‘individualism’ cannot be applied to the Indian context. As Vrinda Nabar in her *Caste as Woman* says that, “Indian conditions are unfavourable for the success of any revolution that has its roots in individualistic values” (Nabar, 34). She reiterates that the one common denominator linking the Indian women together irrespective of their class is their unquestioning acceptance of their role as male/husband/father-defined (Nabar, 34). They exist in relation to a particular male principle, and it is their mission to cement that principle. If the Indian response to feminism was one of scepticism and opposition, it was because the language of Western feminism was incomprehensible and its priorities were remote to the workings of the Indian mind.

Moreover, there are many traditions and customs that have been a huge part of India and its people for hundreds of years. Religious laws and expectations, or “personal laws” enumerated by each specific religion, often conflict with the Indian Constitution, eliminating rights and powers women legally should have. Religions, like Hinduism, call for women to be faithful servants to God and their husbands. They have a term called *pativrata* that describes a wife who has accepted service and devotion to her husband and her family as her ultimate religion and duty. Indian society is highly composed of hierarchical systems within families and communities. India is also a patriarchal society, which, by definition, describes cultures in which males as fathers or husbands take charge as the official heads of household. The descent and inheritance are traced through the male line, known as patrilineal system, and they are generally in control of the distribution of family resources. These
traditions and ways of Indian life have been in effect for so long, that this type of lifestyle is what women expect and are accustomed to.

Chandra Talapade Mohanty provides a critique of hegemonic “Western” feminisms, in her essay, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarships and Colonial Discourses” which is perhaps the first ever written critique of the hegemonic feminist discourse of the West by an Indian. In her essay, Mohanty analyses the portrayal of “Third world women” as presented in Western feminist works. Arpitha Ghosh in her essay on “Indian Feminism” observes that in a number of western radical and liberal feminist writings, Mohanty detects the so called “colonialist move”, and accordingly finds out three analytical presuppositions in those texts which led to the production of the Third world woman as “a singular and monolithic subject”.

Firstly, the western feminist discourse categorises third world women as a coherent group with identical interests, experiences, and goals prior to their entry into the socio-political and historical field. The white feminist show a paternalistic attitude towards third world women, for economic, religious, and familial structures are all judged by Western standards. Thus, the “typical” third world woman is defined as religious, family-oriented, legal minors, illiterate, weak, powerless, and domestic. In contrast to this, Western feminists represent themselves as being sexually liberated, free-minded, in control of their own lives, and secular as well. Mohanty is referring to the self-representation of Western feminists and not to a material reality.
Secondly, Mohanty argues against the “model of power” which the West puts forth, the classical notion of men as oppressors and women as oppressed. This universal concept of patriarchy does not take into account the various socio-political contexts, thereby “robbing” women of their historical and political agency. Mohanty prefers a model of power based on Michel Foucault’s theory that the third world women, placed in their own particular historical and political contexts, can have moments of empowerment which can create a possibility of the evolution of a diverse, heterogeneous sort of subjectivity.

The third blow comes with Mohanty’s critique of the white feminists’ concept of “sisterhood” in terms of common experiences and goals, and the notion of women’s oppression under the monolithic, conspiring sort of patriarchal dominance. Mohanty is unhappy with this Western methodology of oversimplification of “facts”. She goes on to expose the space between the third world women as “representation” versus “real life” third world women. She is trying to put forth her hypothesis that secularisation may have played a pivotal role in the becoming of a white Western feminist consciousness, but this may certainly not be so for women, all over the world.

Mohanty, at the end of her analysis and observations concludes that the most valuable kind of feminist research should avoid specious generalisations about “Third World Women” or “Women in Africa”, instead should take into account the lived experiences of specific women as a basis for understanding and theorising. If experience remains a vital criterion for the framing of theoretical perspectives, then the clustering of the experiences of the third world women is a necessity. But,
someone should be entitled to enlighten the theorists about the “real experiences” of those women. In India, it is Susie Tharu and K.Lalitha who have tried to gather and re-discover the writings of the Indian women. They have compiled an anthology of two volumes of women writing from thirteen languages, for the first time, which illuminates the lives of women over two millennia of Indian history and extend our understanding of literature, feminism, and the making of modern India. They have meticulously taken special note of women writers who were criticised or spoken about dismissively, and also of controversies that involved these women. In the process they have come across debates in which women had intervened, about their roles as wives, companions, and mothers who “also” wrote.

When the Westernised feminism arrived in India in the mid-seventies, most of the Indian women were against it and reacted in three distinct ways. Suma Chitnis in her essay “Feminism: Indian Ethos and Indian Convictions” states that,

First, they expressed their disapproval of feminist anger. Second, they showed a mixed and confused reaction to the feminist emphasis on patriarchy and particularly on men as the principal oppressors; and third, their relative inability to tune into the demands for equality and personal freedom. Hence, understanding the roots of such reactions is important from the point of view of gearing both activist feminism, and women’s studies in India to the Indian ethos and Indian convictions. (Chitnis, 82-83)

A conscious probing into the Indian hierarchies along with the cultural heritage and traditional religiosity will perhaps lead us to some sound conclusion regarding such distrustful reactions from the majority of Indian women.
Indian cultural tradition advocates an integrated working of the body, mind and spirit without which attainment of self-realisation is not possible. Today, it is quite different from the materialistic civilisation of the West. Our social system and our philosophy, religion and yoga, art and literature lay emphasis on the need to rise up to a fuller vision of the Eternal by following the dictates of conscience, morality and ‘dharma’. The basic idea of our philosophical tradition is that a person is not only an individual among other individuals, but is, in principle, knit closely with a family, a community, and ultimately with the whole human race. The practice of hierarchical values tends to orient the husband and the wife towards caring for the larger family. In such a social set up it is obvious that women could never be regarded as inferior to men.

Kapil Kapoor in his essay “Hindu Women, Tradition and Modernity”, brings out three facts that stand out to show how the Western social condition is different from our Indian condition. Firstly, the societal attitude to sexuality both male and female has been different. Both homosexuality and lesbianism have some kind of legitimacy. There is a sanction in Genesis, for self-indulgence and for the gratification of one’s appetites and desires, in the roots of Western civilisation without any ethics of restraint to govern this. Secondly, an unbridled sexuality in the high incidence of teenage abortions and unwed mothers and the concomitant trauma are witnessed. Thirdly, this unbridled sexuality is more harmful where the institutions of family and marriage are weak. One can witness all kinds of non-conventional modes of living together designed for transient pleasures and satisfactions. They are in tune with consumer economics, the use- and discard –economy. In such a framework the woman loses her bio-social identity as a mother or as a wife with no question of any
meaningful identities, ending up as “Baby-doll” with the Marilyn Monroe image. (Kapoor, 32)

The situation in India is totally different. In India, sexual freedom has not assumed enormous proportion as in the West. In India, economic freedom for women is more important than sexual freedom. In the West, women equate identity with independence and equality with men; in India, the guiding principle is ‘cooperation’. Indian society has always been hierarchical. In the Indian context, the Hindu family is recognised by sociologists the world over as a recognisably different and vibrant institution, for the Hindu family structure extends in varying degrees, to widening concentric circles of relationships. The existence of innumerable kinship terms in Hindu social system- and their absence in the West- tells its own story of cultural density in the area of human relationships. Every relationship is named and is a unique world with its dharma, making our society a vibrant one. Moreover, the Indian society differs from the Western society in the sense that it is a duty-oriented society and not a right-oriented society. The duty-oriented society manages itself not by fighting for rights but by excelling in performing duties, with the traditional emphasis on dharma, which not only calls for righteous living in general but for the proper discharge of our basic duties in our individual social set-ups.

The Western feminist movement was a separatist movement by women fighting for their rights. The Indian women’s movement, on the contrary, was not a separatist movement, but a movement started by men and later joined by women. After independence, equal rights for women have been guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. Sagarika Ghose in her article Indian Feminism: Coming of Age, states
that, “Also, unlike in the West, Indian feminism has never really been anti-family although we oppose patriarchy within the family structure”. Therefore, one cannot arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the Indian women by just applying the tools of Western feminist theories; instead, one has to move beyond mainstream feminism towards a ‘new feminism’ to understand the situation of women in the Indian context. At the same time, one cannot deny or ignore the struggle and efforts put forth by the mainstream feminists in uplifting the women and bringing a social status to them to a certain level which has helped all the women, including the women of the third world countries. But the women of the third world countries are not comfortable with the feminists’ individualistic views and negative attitude towards marriage, motherhood, family, and responsibility of children. That is why we need to go beyond mainstream feminism towards anti-feminist feminism.

**NEW FEMINISM:**

A new trend emerged in modern feminism as a backlash to squash feminist demands for equal treatment and justice, not by the misogynist males but by the women themselves. Modern feminism faced a serious problem as many women were unhappy with the things that were happening and attributed their unhappiness to feminism itself. Betty Freidan in “The Second Stage” accused feminists for greatly underrating the value and necessity of the family. The backlash vein continued with Naomi Wolf, Katie Roiphe, Christina Hoff Sommers, Daphne Patia, Camille Paglia and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese who continued to call themselves feminists, but were clinical in their criticism of the movement for which they have been labelled anti-feminists by the mainstream feminists. Even Bell Hooks in her book, “Feminism is for everybody: Passionate Politics”, argues that feminism cannot succeed without
men’s participation in the movement, that men can exist as “worthy comrade(s) in struggle” because feminism is anti-sexism, not anti-male. She concludes that “enlightened feminists see that men are not the problem, that the problems are patriarchy, sexism and male domination” (Hooks, 67). In a similar trend, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese in her book, *Feminism is Not the Story of My Life*, states that most women see “official” feminism being indifferent to their deepest concerns. They are upset by the movement’s negative attitude towards marriage and motherhood, its attacks on men, and their contempt towards women’s choice of treating family responsibilities as their primary job. What she wants is:

A successful career and a happy marriage, equal pay for equal work and conditions that allow us to care of our children; freedom from sexual harassment and discrimination and a measure of sexual freedom. (Genovese, 152)

Genovese recommends a new and more responsive feminism which unlike its predecessor, attends to the real-life needs and aspirations of a wide range of women; sees men and women as partners rather than antagonists in the quest of life. She calls it “Family feminism” which is based on the facts of women’s lives, that brings women together, on the basis of the things that they have in common; that promotes their rights without shunning other responsibilities; that encourages women to decide their own priorities rather than attempting to live up to an unachievable ideal.

Naomi Wolf in “Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How it will Change the 21st Century” talked of a ‘new’, ‘power’ feminism- which she portrayed as a radical break with the ‘old’, ‘victim’ feminism. According to Wolf this ‘new’ ‘power’ feminism:

- Examines closely the forces arrayed against a woman so she can exert her power more effectively.
Knows that a woman’s choices affect many people around her and can change the world.

Encourages a woman to claim her individual voice rather than merging her voice in a collective identity.

Seeks power and uses it properly.

Wants women to acquire money, both for their own dreams, independence and security, and for social change.

Is tolerant of other women’s choices about sexuality and appearance.

Hates sexism without hating men. (149-150)

Likewise, Alice Walker too takes an anti-feminist stance, uses the term ‘womanism’ in her collection of essays entitled In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose published in 1983. At the beginning of the collection she gives a definition of this, as

... Like a woman... usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or wilful behaviour. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered ‘good’ for one... [A womanist is also] a woman who loves other women sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture....and women’s strength....committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist... womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (Walker, pp xi-xii)

Alice Walker felt that as feminism could not fully account for the experiences of black women, she found it necessary to find other terminologies that could carry the weight of those experiences and coined the term “Womanism”. Her construction of womanism with its different meanings is an attempt to situate the black woman in history and culture, and at the same time to rescue her from negative and inaccurate stereotypes that mask her in American society. First, Walker inscribes the black
woman as a knowing/thinking subject who is always in pursuit of knowledge. Second, she highlights the black woman’s agency, strength, capability, and independence. Opposed to the gender separatism that bedevils feminism, womanism presents an alternative for black women by framing the survival of their community where the fate of women and that of men are inextricably linked. As Patricia Hill Collins aptly notes,

> Many black women view feminism as a movement that at best, is exclusively for women, and, at worst, dedicated to attacking or eliminating men...Womanism seemingly supplies a way for black women to address gender-oppression without attacking black men. (Collins, 1996: 11)

According to Alice Walker, a womanist is not a separatist but someone who is a “universalist”, committed to “wholeness of entire people, male and female”. She thus harmonises two contradictory subject positions: a dedication to personal freedom along with an acknowledgement of the innate interconnectedness of people and genders. Walker’s third definition stresses this balance between separation and association, identifying a woman-ist as someone committed not only to sexual gratification but also political struggle, to herself and to the wider community within which she is situated. Walker’s final definition: “Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender,” sums up the subtle distinction between feminism and womanism.

In 1993 the word “womanism” with the meanings Alice Walker bestowed on it was added to “The American Heritage Dictionary”. The concept has had a profound influence in the formation of theories and analytical frameworks in women/gender studies, religious studies/black studies, and literary studies.
With the ‘women’s studies’, springing as a separate branch of literature, much research has been done in the field of women and feminism, yet, there seems to be certain lacunae in the ideas of critics. The objective of this study would be to analyse and make a comparative study of the women characters in the novels of Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee in the light of ‘family feminism’. This study would also attempt to trace the development, if any, of a distinct female sensibility. An attempt is made to look beyond feminism, to examine them in a new and different perspective, and also if possible, to search for an extended vision.