INTRODUCTION

The origin and the growth of the novel in India are generally attributed to the Western literary impact. Though fiction as a literary genre was not new to India, it was only at the end of the nineteenth century that the novel made its appearance on the country’s literary scene. The growth of national consciousness and the search for national identity are the major reasons that made Indian writers writing in English give expression in their literary works to multitudinous vibrations of the Indian soul during the transition. R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, Manohar Malgonkar and Kushwant Singh are the prominent writers among them. The emergence of women’s writing in India during the last quarter of the nineteenth century assumes great importance, in the sense that it marks the birth of an era which promises a new deal for the Indian women. The women novelists reflect the feminine point of view and a feminine sensibility. The distinct feature of the creative writings by women during the last two and a half decades has been one of increased awareness of the abuses which the women are subjected to. This sensitivity among the writers to deal with problems of women can be attributed to the influence of the Feminist Movement.

Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, Shobha De and Arundhati Roy are a few popular Indian women writers who portray the consciousness of the urban middle class woman, who, in quest of her identity undergoes a change - from a silent sufferer to a hard-core rebel, breaking with
the age-old and restraining ethics of the male-dominated world. The rebellion of the woman takes extreme forms such as sexual promiscuity or extramarital relations which serve as a device for her to assert her ‘self’. It is the theme of self-assertion which is also central to most of the novels of Shobha De. Anita Desai’s novels do not show much preoccupation with the socio-political questions of the time. They mostly turn inward. Interestingly, the appearance of women novelists like Anita Desai and Shobha De added a new dimension to Indian English novel. They, with their feminine sensibility, opened up a new vista of human nature and man-woman relationship. Perhaps, the most striking feature of the contemporary Indian English fiction has been the emergence of feminist literature – feminist in the sense of being written by women novelists as well as in the sense of giving voice to the sufferings, aspirations and assertions of women in a traditionally male-dominated world.

While novelists like R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and Bhabani Bhattacharya have dealt with man and his world in relation to the social reality in their respective novels, women novelists like Anita Desai and Shobha De boldly attempt to deal mainly with the problems of women in their novels thereby exposing the designs of the patriarchal order. They present in their respective novels the psychological trauma of women and their themes are the individuals pitted against themselves and against the milieu. Thus by shifting the realm of her novels from outer to inner reality and fathoming the nocturnal recesses of the human psyche, Anita Desai brings the Indian novel into the
mainstream of European and American fiction. Anita Desai and Shobha De are the two contemporary women writers who have contributed very much to the Indian novel by taking up women’s issues in their novels and by adopting new novelistic techniques. The most significant social issue that Anita Desai focuses in her novels is the institution of marriage - particularly in the novels where woman is the protagonist. Like Anita Desai, Shobha De is also a writer who has the gift of exploring the subdued depths of women psychology.

Shobha De deals with the themes of family, career, recognition of the self, the patriarchal society and marriage in her writings. Most of her characters are economically independent and socially uninhibited and conscious of their self-respect. They are also shockingly enterprising, bold, innovative and ever ready to face challenges to assert their individuality. What is interesting to note in the novels of Anita Desai and Shobha De is their primary concern for women in dealing with the theme of incompatibility in marriage and the marital discord that seriously affects the whole family relationships. They present artistically the plight of their characters with their oddities and limitations in their respective novels. They have feminist concerns and this is evident in their choice of themes and treatment of characters in their novels. An attempt is made in this dissertation to study their feminist perspectives.

Both the novelists are also aware of the Feminist Movements of the West and they, consciously or unconsciously may have been influenced by them in some way or other. A brief discussion of the Feminist Movement and
Feminist Critical Theory at this juncture is warranted to study their feminist perspectives. According to Jardine, feminism is generally understood as a movement from the point of view of, by and for women. Moi defines feminism as a political position, femaleness as a matter of biology and feminists as a set of culturally determined characteristics. The two words feminist and feminism, says Moi, are political labels supporting the aims of women’s movements of the 1960s. Moi says in *Modern Literary Theory* that feminine represents nurture and female nature. Feminity is thus a social construct to her. Moi has used the term post-feminism to cover different configurations of feminism and post-modernism (204).

Feminism cannot be anti-male since psychologically a woman needs a man’s loving company and cannot be contented with lesbianism. It is, however, believed that feminism must raise the women question in all its aspects - all the issues pertaining to the growth and grandeur of women. Precisely, feminism is the adage which advocates woman’s complete equality with men in all spheres of life - political, social, legal, economic, familial, cultural, academic - and the Feminist Movement is an organized effort for achieving such an equality and rights for women.

In fact, Feminist Criticism studies women as writers and its subjects are history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women, the psychodynamics female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and the laws of female literary tradition.
Feminist Critical Theory is considered to be a political discourse, a literary and theoretical commitment to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism and not merely a gender study in literature. The feminist critical perspective and theory become pertinent to the study and analysis of the social, institutional and personal power relations between the sexes. Showalter calls feminist critics as Gynocritics (*The New Feminist Criticism* 128). Spacks is of the view that feminist theories are concerned with women’s writings. Spacks’s study opened up new avenues for the feminist literary history and criticism. She asserts that women’s writings have been different and they have shaped women’s creative expression. The female body and female difference in language and text are the theoretical formulations of French Feminist criticism.

On the other hand, English Feminist Criticism, stresses women’s oppression. French Feminist Criticism is psychoanalytic that stresses repression, whereas the American Feminist Criticism is mainly textual and it follows the Gynocentric approach. Virginia Woolf is of the view that a woman’s writing is different from the writings of men writers. “A woman’s writing is always feminine; it cannot help being feminine; at its best it is most feminine; the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine” (181). *Sexual Politics*, a phenomenal study critically explores the task of feminist critics and theorists and exposes the ways of male dominance (Millet 237). Feminist theoreticians have generally revealed the fraudulent objectivity of male science. Simon de Beauvoir in her pioneering work *The Second Sex* seeks
primary inquiries of modern feminism. In a critical venture where a woman tries to seek her identity, she tries to define herself by saying “I am a woman”. In fact, the terms “Feminine and Masculine represent social construct patterns of sexuality and behaviour imposed by cultural and social norms” (233).

On the other hand, Helene Cixous considers femininity as negativity, absence of meaning, irrationality, chaos and darkness. Julia Kristeva's emphasis on marginality allows the repression of the feminine as a position and not the essence. Kristeva in one of her articles, “Women's Time” explores a deconstructive approach to sexual difference and argues for feminist struggle to be seen historically and politically as a three-tiered phenomenon covering women’s equality, femininity and rejection of the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical (Feminist Literary Criticism 46-47).

Feminist literary criticism also examines the genre-genre relationship and the language used by women writers in their works. There is a quest for a feminine style and syntax and Dorothy Richardson talks about her attempt to create a feminine prose and Virginia Woolf describes women's sentence. For the women's movement of the 1960s and early 1970s the subject of feminism was women's experience under patriarchy. The long tradition of male rule in society which silenced women's voices, distorted their lives, and treated their concerns as peripheral. When We Dead Awaken seemed to Andrienne Rich a justified title for an address regarding women at the Modern Language Association in 1970. Rich inspired into life a school of feminist literary
criticism that took the history of women's oppression and the silencing of their voices as twin beacons to guide its work.

Contemporary Feminist literary criticism begins as much in the women's movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s as it does in the academy. Its antecedents go back much further, of course, whether one takes Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* or an even earlier text as a point of departure. Maggie Hum cites Inanna, a text written 2,000 years before the Bible that presents the fate of a goddess who questioned sexual discourse. Early on, feminist scholars realized that the canon taught in schools was overwhelmingly male oriented. Showalter set about reconstructing a history of women writers in *A Literature of Their Own*. Interestingly, the feminist literary criticism is the direct product of the Women’s movements of the 1960s. It deals with reading as a woman and writing as a woman and responding to the way women are presented in literature. It may also be concerned with ‘woman as the producer of textual meanings with history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women’ (*Towards a Feminist Poetics* 407).

It is also an ideological protest against what Virginia Woolf called patriarchy or the role of the father. It is deconstructive in spirit and method and as such it aims at a revisionist reading of literary history and typology. Elaine Showalter describes the change in the late 1970s as a shift of attention from androtexts (books by men) to gynotexts (books by women). She also detects in the history of women’s writing “a femine phase”, “a feminist phase” and “a
female phase” (465). Elaine Showalter devised Feminist Criticism into two distinct varieties, namely, woman as a reader and woman as a writer. The first type is concerned with woman as the consumer of male-produced literature. She calls this kind of analysis feminist critique. It is a historically grounded enquiry probing the ideological assumptions of literary phenomena. Its subjects include the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism, and the fissures in male-constructed literary history. Its concern is also with the exploitation and manipulation of the female audience in popular culture and film. It also analyses woman-as-sign in semiotic systems.

The second type is concerned with woman as the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women. It also includes the subjects such as psychodynamics of female creativity; linguistics and the problem of a female language. Further, it deals with the trajectory of the individual or the collective female literary career, literary history and studies of particular writers and work. Showalter has conveniently adapted the French term “la gynocritique” as “gynocritics” to refer to this category. Gynocritics concern themselves with developing a specifically female frame work for dealing with works written by women, in all aspects of their production, motivation, analysis, and interpretation, and in all literary forms, including journals and letters. Notable books in this mode are Patricia Meyer Spacks’ *The Female Imagination* (1975), Elle Moers’ *Literary
Women (1976) and Elaine Showalter’s A Literature of Their Own (1977). As such, gynocritics develop new models based on the study of female experience rather than adapt male models and theories. In fact, the focus is not on fitting women between the lines of the male tradition but on the nearly visible aspect of female culture.

Showalter then stresses the need to reconstruct the past literature of women and to rediscover the scores of women writers whose works have been obscured by time, and to establish the continuity of the female tradition. If the feminist critics recreated the chain of writers in this tradition and their influence from one generation to the next, they can challenge the periodicity of orthodox literary history and its achievement. Showalter has termed these in A Literature of Their Own as the Feminine, Feminist and Female stages. During the Feminine Phase (from 1840 to 1880) women wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievement of the male culture. In the Feminist phase (1880 to 1920), women, after the winning of the vote, rejected the accommodating postures of feminity and used literature to dramatise the ordeals of wronged womanhood. In the Female Phase (since 1920), women reject both imitation and protest and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art. They extend the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature. On the other hand, Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf, the representatives of the Formal Female Aesthetic, started thinking in terms of male and female sentences. They divided their work into masculine
journalism and feminine fiction and redefined sexualized external and internal experience.

Interestingly, Feminist Criticism has tried a variety of theoretical approaches. It moves towards revision and some versions of related ideologies like Marxist aesthetics and structuralism, altering their vocabulary and methods to include the variable of gender. As Mill observes, “Feminist Criticism can emancipate itself from the influences of accepted models, and guide itself by its own impulses as gynocritics do” (406). Showalter believes that the new sciences of the text based linguistics, genetic structuralism; deconstruction and neo-formalism are manly and aggressive and not intuitive and feminine. She is of the view that the task of feminist critics is mainly to find a new language, a new way of reading that can integrate their intelligence and experience, their reason and suffering, their scepticism and vision.

Moi considers the words feminist and feminism as political labels supporting the aims of women’s movement of the 1960’s (204). The main concerns of the feminist critique are the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions of and misconceptions about women in criticism, and the fissures in male constructed literary history. Elaine Showalter suggests that the feminist theorists accept a sexist differentiation and yield to assimilation. Judith Fetterley took up the question of how women are represented in American literature. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar examine the issue of what it meant for women writers to seek entry to a tradition dominated by images
that did such violence to women in *The Mad Woman in the Attic*. The African American feminist scholars like Mary Helen Washington and, Barbara Smith depicted the history of African American women's experience along with the twin axes of race and gender that had a unique specificity. Lesbian feminist critics like Bonnie Zimmerman and Susan Griffin reconstructed a hidden tradition of lesbian writing and explored the experience of radical women within a heterosexist world. Feminist scholars began to notice how the seemingly disinterested aesthetic categories that imbued literary scholarship in the academy automatically disqualified such writing from consideration for inclusion in the canon.

The “French feminism” - essentially the work of Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Helene Cixous- created an impact on how feminist scholars thought about their work and about the assumptions that inspired it. Woman, that unproblematic character of feminist stories about the world, suddenly became a matter of interpretation. Liberal and Radical feminists had been in disagreement since the 1970s regarding the direction the women's movement should take towards a deeper identification with the female essence towards a departure from the way women had been made to be by patriarchy, the very thing radical feminist constructed an essentially female. There was no possible meeting of minds between the two, for each necessarily denied the other.

The Essentialist argues that women are innately capable of offering a different ethics from men, one more attuned to preserving the earth from
destruction by weapons devised by men. Men must abstract themselves from the material world as they separate from mothers in order to acquire a license to enter the patriarchate, and they consequently adopt a violent and aggressive posture towards the world left behind, which is now construed as an object. They believe that men think in terms of rights when confronted with ethical issues, while women think in terms of responsibilities to others. Marxist feminists noted that much of what the essentialists took to be signs of a good female nature were, in fact, attributes assigned to women in capitalist culture to make them better domestic labourers and better angels in the house. But, Feminist critics like Judith Butler are of the view that all gender is performative, an imitation of a code that refers to no natural substance. Masculine means not feminine as much it means anything natural. Susan Jeffords in *The Remasculinization of American Culture* notices, for example, that male masculinity in US culture after the Vietnam War is constructed through an expulsion of emotional traits associated with femininity.

The encounter with the psychoanalysis has been crucial to the development of contemporary feminist thinking about literature and culture. Millett attacks Freud's most noteworthy mistakes regarding women, but later feminists have argued that the engagement with psychoanalysis should not be one entirely of rejection.

Gender is socially constructed; although Freud's own account is patriarchal, other accounts are possible, as are other ways of construing human
subjectivity. While Freud favoured the Oedipal drama of gender inscription whereby the father's intervention between mother and son initiates the separation that preserves civilization, feminists have urged that greater attention be given to the pre-oedipal period, one shaped by the child's relationship with its mother at least in traditional households in which men work and women do domestic labour. The mother-child relationship might be found more of the constituents of identity as object relation psychoanalytic theory claims then are given during the late oedipal stage. This shift in attention has the virtue of displacing a central, the oratorical premise of patriarchal culture - that fathers determine sexual identity - but broaches the dangerous possibility of reducing a sociological postulate - mothering-to a biological destiny.

Interestingly, Feminist literary criticism moves with time from the criticism of writing by men and the exploration of writing by women to a questioning of what it means as to engage with or in language. In its outer boundary, the feminist literary criticism that arose in the 1970s in the US and the Commonwealth countries discovers the conditions as well as the limits of its own possibility in language and in literacy. By looking beyond the boundary it encounters its own origin in the pain of denied speech and the presumption of assigned speech. There as well, perhaps, from the achieved vantage of an international, trans ethnic perspective, it discovers a field of work that takes it back beyond its own beginning in the emergence from silence into language to undo the silence of those who still do not speak.
Feminism as a literary, cultural, social and political movement of the twentieth century calls for a definite set of attitudes. This is because psychologically feminist consciousness is a consciousness of victimization. It aims to discover and cure the deep-rooted reasons for the oppression of women. It attempts not at mere individual awareness, but in raising the consciousness of an entire culture. The movement thus proves how sexuality is a strong factor in texts. Thus, in having established gender as a fundamental category of literary analysis, feminism has found out a strong basis for its analysis.

Feminist perspectives on literature developed in the context of the various women's liberation movements that emerged with greater force in 1960s and 1970s. Women as writers have resisted their social, intellectual and political marginalization in patriarchal cultures. Their efforts to voice their protest set about producing new knowledge. This new knowledge in feminist perspectives enhances literature study because the word feminist implies a certain stance vis-à-vis women: it implies a concern with gender difference in general, but taking up the perspective of women specifically. It implies identification with women’s concerns. A feminist perspective, in this context, explores the relationship between the images, characters in a literary work, and the context for their production. This also includes the questions related to the frequent appearance of a particular group of women characters and the discrimination that occurs on the basis of race and gender. Such a study may
also explain how meanings about women are produced socially, politically and culturally.

The age-long prejudices towards women led to the feminist rebellion in the late 1960s and the early 1970s in the West and since then critics have tried to examine the issues of sex, gender and language in literary and cultural discourse.

The main issues which have become increasingly significant are, to what extent the voices and experiences of women are represented in literature? Can a male writer adequately represent women characters and female experience? If language in general and the institutions of literature in particular are male dominated, then can a woman writer break these restrictions to articulate the genuine female consciousness? How far do the women writers succeed in expressing feminine sensibility? One has to examine these issues carefully.

It seems that most feminist writings try to eschew a singular, centralised vision for a more ‘plural’ and ‘decentred’ range of approaches that vary from region to region and partly because of the ideological specificity of the discourse which can be traceable to history, philosophy, anthropology, psychoanalysis and even Marxist Economics and Sociology. These plural and decentred range of approaches, however, are in no way detrimental to the feminist discourse; rather they add to its richness and variety. The issues of gender and the place of women in literature are the most essential aspects of
feminist discourse. The reason for this is that in any society and culture, male is regarded as the norm, the central or neutral position from which the female is a departure. Feminism in the West is treated as an off-shoot of Marxism. Twentieth century feminist social theory cannot be isolated or understood separately from feminism as a social movement. As the Feminist Movement has changed, from being a campaign for equal voting rights in the 1920s to being a radical movement for gender equality at work and in domestic activities, legal relations and cultural practices, so also is the feminist social theory that has evolved through a variety of forms: Liberalism, Marxism and Post-modernism. In general terms, the concern of the feminist social theory is to understand and explain the subordinate position of women in society with reference to gender difference, specifically in terms of a theory of patriarchy. R.A. Singh in his essay, “Coping with Gender and Man-made Language: an Approach towards Feminism” rightly points out that the issues of gender and the place of women in literature are the most important aspects of feminist discourse (2).

The Feminist version of equal-rights doctrines, which had their philosophical origins in M. Wollstonecraft’s A **Vindication of the Rights of Women** was eventually expressed through the suffragette movement, which attempted to remove various political and social barriers to women’s full participation in society. The ‘first wave’ of feminism was primarily concerned with the problem of formal equality between men and women. In the 1960s
feminism assumed a more radical focus, seeking a revolutionary transformation of society as a whole. In theoretical terms, this radical turn involved the adoption of ideas from a variety of radical traditions, including Marxism, psychoanalysis and anarchism. In America, this second wave feminism was associated with the struggle for civil rights for the Blacks. This political struggle produced the view that the subordination of women was comparable to the subjugation of the Blacks under conditions of imperialism. The Black and female liberation has to take place not only in economic and political terms but also on the levels of psychology and culture. This struggle against patriarchal was also associated with the anti-militarism and with ecological concerns about the environmental destruction of the plants. At the level of social theory, there were many experiments to combine feminism with various branches of socialist Critical Theory. The key publications in the second wave feminism were Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, S. Finestone’s *The Dialectics of Sex*, G. Greer’s *The Female Eunuch*, Millett’s *Sexual Politics* and D. Mitchell’s *Women: The Longest Revolution*.

In the 1980s and 1990s the feminist social theory was influenced by post-structuralism and post-modernist analysis. Following the post-modernist emphasis on difference and plurality, feminist-theorists have argued that traditional feminist analysis tended to reflect the viewpoints of the white, middle class women of North America and Western Europe. It is claimed that the ‘third wave feminism’ is more sensitive to local, diverse voices of feminism
and rejects a universalistic perspective on a single feminist standpoint. Some of
the critical publications of contemporary feminism include: N. Chodorow,
_Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory_, L. Gilligan, _In a Difference Voice_,
B. Hooks, _Feminist Theory_, and C. Weadon, _Feminist Practice and
Poststructuralist Theory_. Many feminist theorists are anxious that post-
modernism will dilute Feminist Criticism on patriarchy and undermine their
ability to act as a unified political movement, because post-modern relativism
will challenge the universalistic thrust of feminist opposition to male
dominance. Some post-modern feminists claim that forms of female oppression
still exist in modern society and that feminist politics cannot be abandoned
prematurely. In Feminist discourse, writing is a liberating process and it
liberates from what Rich calls “Oppressor’s language” (_Of Women Born:
Motherhood as Experienced and Institution_ 70).

The woman writers experience an anti-patriarchal rage which gets
reflected in their writings. The themes, subjects, characters and situations
created by women authors out of this rage are bound to be different from those
by men writers in a patriarchal society. Showalter in _Towards a Feminist
Poetics_ suggests that attempts of gynocritics should be to illuminate every
aspect of women’s writing in a male dominated society (171). For Moi, the
feminist writing has “A discernible anti-patriarchal and anti-sexist position”
(_Feminist Literary Criticism_ 220). Beauvoir in her critique of psychoanalytic
theory in _The Second Sex_ (1972) maintained that Freud’s vision was male-
centred.
The task of feminist critics is to find a new language, a new way of reading that can integrate feminist intelligence and feminist experience, feminist reason and feminist suffering, feminist scepticism and feminist vision (Sethuraman 407). What exactly is then feminism? A general definition might state that it is the belief that women, purely and simply because they are women, are treated inequitably within a society which is organised to prioritise male viewpoints and concerns. Within this patriarchal paradigm, women become everything men are not (or do not want to be seen to be): where men are regarded as strong, women are weak; where men are rational, they are emotional; where men are active, they are passive; and so on.

The discussion of the Feminist Movements, their impact and the relevance of the critical theories are very useful in discussing the novels of Anita Desai and Shobha De in this dissertation. Both the novelists are aware of the Feminist Movements of the West and their implications. They do not then seem to be carried away by any particular school of thought. The first question is if there is any such Feminist Movement in India. The women’s problem in India is slightly different from that of the West. The lower middle class, rural based women who contribute their labour for agriculture and industrial productions, are illiterate and bound by superstition. The middle-class women, who have swelled enormously in the recent years, face a different kind of problem. They are educated and some of them are employed. But this has not given them much relief. These women have to cope with the burden of
domestic responsibilities as well as the demands of their career. Some of the upper class women are aristocratic and the rest are the neo-rich and the first generation educated. The Indian feminism spans all these categories.

Feminism in the Indian context is a by-product of the Western liberalism in general and feminist thought in India in particular. The indigenous contributing factors have been the legacy of equality of sexes inherited from the freedom struggle, constitutional rights of women, spread of education and the consequent new awareness among women. The Indian women are caught in the flux of tradition and modernity and in a dilemma.

In literary terms it precipitates a search for identity and a quest for the definition of the self. In critical practice, it boils down to scrutinizing empathetically the plight of women characters in the receiving end of human interaction. The feminist perspective on literature has had to confront issues such as male chauvinism, sexist bias, psychological and even physical exploitation, and hegemonic inclinations which are not merely the male but also the female sections of society and, the utter disregard for the women’s psychological, cultural familial and spiritual quests. Indian Women novelists have treated these vital issues in their novels. Kamala Das, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandaya and a few others have projected feminine disability. Bharati Mukherjee, Gita Mehta, Shobha De and Anees Jung are a few writers who have taken up themes dealing with the psychological problems of Indian women and their quest for the definition of the self.
In the light of feminist Critical Theory, the novels of Anita Desai and Shobha De can be examined as the manifesto of female predicament. Both of them have established themselves as reputed writers championing the cause of women in their novels. How far are they feminine in their writings and different from the writings of men? This is discussed with reference to their choice of themes and characterization. The recurring themes of Anita Desai’s novels are women's struggle for self-realisation and self-definition and women's quest for her identity, her pursuit of freedom, equality and transcendence, her rebellion and protest against oppression at every level. Anita Desai looks to the past to anatomise the pain inflicted on women down history, to the present in a passionate affirmation of female identity and experience. She expresses a uniquely Indian sensibility that is yet completely at ease in the mind of the West. On the other hand, Shobha De explores the world of urban women in India in her novels and tries to shatter the dominant patriarchal values in the Indian society. She is aware of the fact that the most significant difference between man and woman lies in woman’s sexuality.

While Kamala Das deals with the physical aspect of human relationships, Anita Desai’s focus is on the psychological plane. In Bharati Mukherjee it is a question of identity. Thus, the movement which had started as mere consciousness in writers like Kamala Markandaya, has now assumed a more emphatic voice in writers like Anita Desai and Shobha De. This sensitivity among the Indian women writers can undoubtedly be attributed to
the influence of the Feminist Movement. Feminist Criticism has shown that women readers and critics bring different perceptions and expectations to their literary experiences. In *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, Showalter draws attention to this critical revolution in the following words:

> While literary criticism and its philosophical branch, literary theory, have always been zealously guarded bastions of male intellectual endeavour, the success of Feminist Criticism has opened a space for the authority of the woman critic that extends beyond the study of woman’s writing to the reappraisal of whole body of texts that make up our literary heritage. (3)

Victimization and survival are not only the universal themes of women’s fiction, but they are an intrinsic part of the feminine psyche, and reveal themselves in women’s writing even if the authors do not directly engage in an open critique of the patriarchal society or present the woman’s attempt to achieve selfhood. Feminism emerged as a worldwide movement to secure women’s rights on the one hand and love, respect, sympathy and understanding from men on the other, focussing on women’s struggle for recognition and survival. Bartky is of the view that feminine consciousness is the consciousness of victimization (26).

The miserable condition of woman all over the world inspired women writers to raise their voices against the patriarchal society and the result was the
emergence of Feminism. It is a movement for the emancipation of women and their fight for equal rights. Almost, all the women novelists have been influenced in some way or other by the Feminist Movements. A critical review of the contemporary criticism on Indian women writers would therefore form a legitimate area for research. This would help readers identify the presence, if any, of gender bias in the critical investigation of women writers. The new woman today challenges the traditional notions of angel in the house and sexually voracious image and is essentially a woman of awareness and consciousness of her position in the family and society. The feminist literary criticism has developed as a component of the women’s movement and its impact has brought about a revolution in literary studies.

Compared to the Western countries there has been sparse theoretical writings on feminism in India. Pre-colonial social structures and women’s role in them reveal that feminism was theorized differently in India than in the west. Colonial necessity 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. Historical circumstances and values in India make women’s issues different from that of the western feminist rhetoric. Ironically, the idea of women as ‘powerful’ is accommodated into patriarchal culture through religion. This has retained visibility in all sections of society; by providing women with traditional ‘cultural spaces’. Another consideration is that whereas in the West,
the notion of ‘self’ rests in competitive individualism where people are described as “born free yet everywhere in chains” (Rousseau 5), by contrast 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 have to struggle to carve a separate identity for feminism in India. They define feminism in time and space in order to avoid the Western notions.

Indian women negotiate survival through an array of oppressive patriarchal family structures: age, ordinal status, and relationship to men through family of origin, marriage and procreation as well as patriarchal attributes - dowry, kinship, caste, community, village, market and the state. It should however be noted that several communities in India, such as the Nairs of Kerala, certain Maratha clans, and Bengali families exhibit matriarchal tendencies, with the head of the family being the oldest woman rather than the oldest man. Sikh culture is also regarded as relatively gender-neutral. The heterogeneity of Indian experience reveals that there are multiple patriarchies and so also are there 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.

Feminism can also be defined as 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. Acknowledging sexism in daily life and attempting to challenge and eliminate it through deconstructing mutually exclusive notions of femininity and masculinity as biologically determined categories, open the way towards an equitable society for both men and women. The male and 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. Patriarchy is just one of the hierarchies. Relational hierarchies between women within the same family are more adverse. Here women are pitted against one another. Caste-community identities intensify all other hierarchies. The polytheistic Hindu pantheon provides revered images of women as unique and yet complementary to those of male deities.

The colonial venture into modernity brought concepts of democracy, equality and individual rights. The rise of the concept of nationalism and introspection of discriminatory practices brought about social reform movements related to caste and gender relations. This first phase of feminism in India was initiated by men to uproot the social evils of *sati* 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. Women in this phase were categorized along with lower castes as subjects of social reforms and welfare instead of being recognized as autonomous agents of change. The emphasis was on recreating new space in
pre-existing feminine roles of caring. The women involved were those related to men activists, elite, western educated, upper caste Hindus.

During this period, the struggle against colonial rule intensified and Nationalism became the pre-eminent cause. 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; and carved a niche for those in public space. Women organizations like *All India Women's Conference* (AIWC) and the *National Federation of Indian Women* (NFIW) emerged. Women were grappling with 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 developed their critical consciousness 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. There was provision for women’s enlistment through affirmative action, maternal health and child care provision (crèches), and equal pay for equal work. The state adopted a patronizing role towards women. Women in India did not struggle very much for basic rights as women did in the West. In India, the concept of “equality” was completely alien until liberally exposed Western-educated Indians introduced it in the early nineteenth century. However, the term did not gain meaning in Indian life until the country gained
independence in 1947 and adopted a democratic government. The Indian Constitution then granted equality and freedom from discrimination based on gender or religion, and guaranteed religious freedom. The seven Five-Year Plans provided health, education, employment, and welfare to women. The sixth Five-Year Plan even declares women as ‘partners in development’.

The concept of ‘feminism’ is unique within the context of Indian culture. It cannot be directly equated to feminism in the Western culture. In addition, as for the characteristics that Western culture would label as forms of ‘oppression’, Indian women would instead define them as forms of ‘sorrow’. There are various issues that cause great concern for Indian women. They are hunger, poverty, disease, infant mortality and Illiteracy. Unlike the Western Feminist Movement, India’s movement was initiated by men, and later joined by women. Some of the most influential men involved were Dr. Babasaheb Ambedker, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Keshav Chandra Sen, Malabari Phule, Gopal Ganesh, Agarkar, Mahadev Govind Ranade and Dhondo Keshav Karve.

The efforts of these men included abolishing sati, which was a widow's death by burning on her husband's funeral pyre, the custom of child marriage, abolishing the disfiguring of widows, banning the marriage of upper caste Hindu widows, promoting women’s education, obtaining legal rights for women to own property, and requiring the law to acknowledge women’s status by granting them basic rights in matters such as adoption. Despite these
advancements, many problems still remain unsolved which inhibit these new rights and opportunities from being fully taken advantage of. There are also 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.

Despite these crossovers in legality, the Indian government does not interfere with religion and the personal laws they hold. Religions, like Hinduism, call for women to be faithful servants to God and their husbands. ‘Manu Smruti’ prescribes certain codes of conduct and rules and allots several duties to women. It talks about ‘pati vrata’ that describes a wife who has accepted service and devotion to her husband and her family as her ultimate religious duty. In addition to it, Indian society is highly composed of hierarchical systems within families and communities. These hierarchies can be broken down into age, sex, ordinal position, kinship relationships (within families), and caste, lineage, wealth, occupations, and relationship to ruling power (within the community). When hierarchies emerge within the family based on social convention and economic need, women in general and women in poorer families suffer twice the impact of vulnerability and stability. Even in their families, girls are discriminated against boys. Girls also have less access to their family’s income and assets, which is exacerbated among poor, rural Indian families. From the start, it is understood that women are burdened with
strenuous work and exhausting responsibilities for the rest of their lives, always with little or no compensation or recognition.

India is, no doubt a patriarchal society, which, by definition, describes cultures in which men as fathers or husbands are assumed to be in charge and the official heads of household. The descent and inheritance are traced through the male line, known as a patrilineal system, and they are generally in control of the distribution of family resources. Indian women do not take full advantage of their constitutional rights and remedies.

The female-to-male ratio in India is 933 to 1000, showing that there are numerically fewer women in the country than men. This is due to several factors, including infanticides, most commonly among female infants, and the poor care of female infants and childbearing women. Although outlawed, infanticides are still highly popular in rural India, and are continuing to become even more prominent. This is due to the fact that, most especially in rural areas, families cannot afford girl children because of the dowry they must pay when their daughter gets married. Like infanticide, dowry is also a social evil, but is still a frequent and prevalent occurrence in rural India. Women are considered to be worthless by their husbands if they are not able to beget a male child, and can often face much abuse if this is the case. Some of these vital issues are treated seriously by Anita Desai and Shobha De in their respective novels.

Education for women is much neglected in rural India though it is not the case with the urban India. Girls have a ten percent higher dropout rate than
boys from middle and primary schools, as well as lower levels of literacy than men. Since unemployment is also high in India, women also have to settle for jobs that comply with their obligations as wives, mothers, and homemakers. Gandhi came up with the term *stree shakti* for the concept of womanhood. In the Hindu religion, Gods are not exclusively men. Hinduism sheds a positive light on feminine principles; women are considered to compliment and complete their male counterparts. God is portrayed as an embodiment of siva-shakti - Ardhanari. It is important to note that the deities of both knowledge and wealth are women. Yet women are marginalised in the society. Strangely enough, the problems of women and the violence against them are treated as human rights violation in India. This might be the reason why a Feminist Movement has not emerged in India as it had happened in the West.

Despite the Indian law that considers all men and women as equals, Islam was the first religion to recognize the rights of the women. Muslim women are considered to be the most disadvantaged, impoverished, and politically marginalized group within the Indian society, as well as the most economically and socially vulnerable group. The majority of them are never employed outside the home. The Muslims subject themselves to Sharia/Muslim Personal Laws, which for them override even the Indian Constitution. However the incomplete knowledge about the Muslim Sharia has turned administration in many areas as gender biased in favour of men. In general in the uneducated and rural section of the Indian society, which forms a major percentage of the
total population, women are seen as economic burdens. Their contributions to productivity are mostly invisible as their familial and domestic contributions are unfairly overlooked. Indian women were contributing nearly thirty-six percent of total employment in agriculture and related activities, nearly 19 percent in the service sector, and nearly 12.5 in the industry sector as of the year 2000. The unfortunate reality is that the high illiteracy rate among women confines them to lower paying, unskilled jobs with less job security than men. Even in agricultural jobs where the work of men and women are highly similar, women are still more likely to be paid less for the same amount and type of work as men do. However, in the urban section of the Indian society, women are empowered with laws such as IPC 498 which are heavily biased against the men in the society. Sometimes, girls are denied basic education stating that they are needed to assist their mothers at home and child-marriage is found in rural places. Anita Desai brings out this discrimination and injustice to women in her novels.

In 1986, the National Policy on Education (NPE) was framed in India, and the government launched the programme called Mahila Samakhya, whose focus was on the empowerment of women. Its goal is to create a learning environment for women to realize their potential, learn to demand information and find the knowledge to take charge of their own lives. Modern influences, particularly of the West have affected the younger generations in parts of India, where girls are beginning to forgo the more traditional ways of Indian life and
break gender stereotypes. In more flourishing parts of the country, the idea of dating, or more specifically openly dating, has come into play, and the terms girlfriend and boyfriend are being used. Some women have acquired respectable careers, and can be seen across Bollywood billboards and advertisements. Still women face serious resistance from the anti-liberalists. The country still continues to be male-dominant and intolerant to such Feminist Movements that go against sex and gender traditions in India.

The women’s problem in India is slightly different from that of the West. The lower middle class, rural based women who contribute their labour for agriculture and industrial production, are illiterate and bound by superstition. The middle-class, whose number has swelled enormously in the recent years, faces a different kind of problem. They are educated and some of them are gainfully employed. This has not given them much relief. These women have to cope with the burden of domestic responsibilities as well as the demands of their career. With regard to the upper class, a few of them are aristocrat and the rest are the neo-rich and the first generation educated. They have leisure and money, more than what they can digest. The Indian feminism spans all these categories.

Women writers are of the opinion that the situation calls for a concerted attempt to affirm the dignity of woman in the family as well as in the wider social life. “Anita Desai”, says Maini “is a disturbing and demanding presence in Indo-Anglian Fiction” (215). Woman’s struggle for self-realization is the
main concern in the novels of Anita Desai and Shobha De. Almost in all her novels Anita Desai deals with the theme of marital discord affecting the nuptial relationship leading to domestic disharmony. In the patriarchal Indian society a woman is assigned only the secondary role. De refers to the modus operandi of the patriarchal society in *Socialite Evenings*.

Mother was preoccupied with what to cook for Father’s dinner. It never mattered what the children’s preferences were. It was always him. We were left out the little world ... Mother gave father priority, whether it was at meal time or any time else. (12)

Both Anita Desai and Shobha De are good at depicting the undulations of the female ego or self under the pressure of critical human situations and emotional relationships. Their attention is also focused on feminine suffering in the complex cultural stresses and strains in Indian society, having strong past moorings. Both the novelists explore human relationship in modern Indian society, particularly the husband-wife relationship in their respective novels.

The most striking feature of the contemporary Indian English fiction has been the emergence of feminist literature - feminist in the sense of being written by women novelists as well as in the sense of giving voice to the sufferings, aspirations and assertions of women in a traditionally male-dominated world. Anita Desai’s main pre-occupation is to study the complex human relationship, human existence and human predicament, her exploration being a quest for self. She is the novelist dealing with the psychological problems of women.
The Indian novel till 1970s treated themes of political and social import. It exhibited a splendid array of portrayals: princes and paupers, saints and sinners, white men and babus, farmers and labourers, untouchables and coolies, prosperity and adversity, cities and villages. Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya are pioneers in this field. Writers like Raja Rao, Kamala Markandaya and Khushwant Singh deal with themes of the country’s independence movement, East-West encounter, tradition and modernity, materialism and spiritualism. It is Anita Desai who has introduced a different theme in her novels. Thus, by shifting the realm of her novels from outer to inner reality and fathoming the nocturnal recesses of the human psyche, she brought the Indian novel into the mainstream of European and American fiction. An important phase in the growth of fiction in India, as elsewhere, is the gradual shifting of focus from the external world to the inner world of the individual, capturing the atmosphere of the mind, and directly involving the reader in the flow of a particular consciousness.

As a writer of women centred fiction, Shobha De is aware of the fact that the most significant difference between man and woman lies in woman’s sexuality. If a woman has to establish an indigenous identity of her own, she ought to shatter the economic, social, political and cultural barriers posited by various forces throughout the ages. To her, the elitist section of Bombay seems to constitute India. Most of her characters are Bombay-groomed women by birth. Even if they are not born there, it is their EL Dorado where they ultimately reach. Shobha De’s association with magazines like *Stardust,*
Society, Celebrity and Mega City has made her use journalistic jargon in her fiction too. There is a unique sense of freedom, conviction and courage that help her in using her language. Can she be equated with any other Feminist group of the West? It is very difficult to do so. Shobha De herself does not prefer being branded as a feminist. She says: “I write with a great deal of empathy towards women without waving the feminist flag, I feel very strongly about the woman’s situation” (The Hindustan Times Magazine 3).

Shobha De may elude labels since she might not prefer to limit her writings beneath a particular brand. The fact cannot be denied that the pivotal concern of all her writings is women. In this sense she continues to be a novelist with a feminist perspective. An attempt is made in this dissertation to discuss the novels of both Anita Desai and Shobha De in the light of the observations made on the Feminist Movement and Feminist theories and to evaluate their select novels focusing on their feminist perspective.

A number of critical works has been published on the two novelists on their themes and art. No serious attempt has been made to compare these two writers critically examining their feminist perspective. This thesis attempts to compare these two writers focussing on their feminist perspective. The study warrants formal, sociological and psychological approaches for the discussion of themes, characterization, their attitudes, their feminist perspective and the narrative technique adopted and they are judiciously analysed in this dissertation. These aspects are discussed in the succeeding chapters with reference to the select novels of the two writers.