‘Feminine Spirituality’ has involved the creation and maintenance of ‘home-life’ as much as it has involved the capacity to receive authority. It involves the competence to sacralize space or, in other words, an intuitive aesthetic sensitivity to environmental spaces, or sensitivity which may be termed ‘Domestic Consciousness’. Women have often been tied to their domestic life because of the restrictions of single family or home. However, in some women this ‘domestic consciousness’ operates as an expansive spirituality, extending beyond the four walls of a home to a commitment to a larger human family, to an attention to social and environmental spaces, and to an artistic appreciation of the human soul as itself a household. The term ‘veedu’ in Tamil means both the house and the moksha, and ‘veedu peru adaithal’ – deliverance – means to receive the benediction to construct the Home. ‘Aesthetics of Feminine Spirituality’ engages in seeing how the mechanics of poetry help the demonstration of ‘domestic consciousnesses’.

‘Aesthetics’ is a branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of beauty, its creation and appreciation, art and taste, and is defined as the study of sensory or sensori-emotional values, sometimes also called judgments of taste and sentiment. ‘Aesthetics’ is a vast area of study with several diversifications, with a greater focus on art. Aesthetic judgment usually goes beyond sensory discrimination, can be linked to emotions or like emotions that are partially embodied in our physical reactions just as the reaction of awe seeing the sublime view of the landscape. It may be, to some extent, culturally conditioned, intellectual and interpretative. Aesthetic judgments are seen to be based on the senses, emotions, intellectual opinions, will, desires, culture, preferences, values, subconscious behavior, conscious decisions, training, instinct, sociological institutions, or some complex combination of these, depending on the application of particular theory one employs.

‘Feminist Aesthetics’ participates in Feminist discourse and cannot be categorized as a variety of Aesthetics. Carolyn Korsmeyer observes that feminist perspectives in aesthetics are attuned “to the cultural influences that exert power over subjectivity: the way that art both reflects and perpetuates the social formation of gender, sexuality, and identity, and the way that all of those features are framed by factors such as race, national origin, social position, and historical situation” (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy)(5). Hence, to construct the theory of ‘Feminist Aesthetics’, the scholars have to explore several areas – one such being ‘Feminine Spirituality’, the framing of which requires scrutiny of various segments — the major slice is the literary works, the emotionally sensitive and fine-tuned ones possessing characteristics traditionally labeled both “masculine” and “feminine.” The present paper “Aesthetics of Feminine Spirituality” then, proposes to look into the subject in different divisions. The phrase ‘Feminine Spirituality’ is the linkage of the two terms ‘spirituality’ and ‘femininity’ and hence they require a brief discussion.

The term ‘Spirituality’, like many abstract terms defies precise definition. In general, it denotes the search of ‘sacred’, something that is set apart and worthy of veneration. The usage of the term has changed throughout the ages and in present times, spirituality separated from religion, is broadly
related to humanistic concerns, personal well-being and development, and also has come to mean the internal experience of an individual. The terms spirituality and religion can both refer to the search for the Absolute or God. But, a number of people see them as separate entities, religion being a way in which humans can experience spirituality. Religion is not identical with spirituality, but, it is the form spirituality takes in civilization. Those who speak of spirituality outside of religion often define themselves as “spiritual but not religious” and believe in the existence of many different “spiritual paths” - emphasizing the importance of finding one’s own individual path to spirituality. With regards to religion, spirituality takes on the following characteristics: faith becomes more personal, less dogmatic, more open to experimentation, and is based upon personal experience. Accordingly, religion and spirituality then, are merely two stages in the inner growth of the faithful aspirant. Consequently, many followers of constituted religions consider spirituality as an intrinsic and inseparable aspect of their religious experience.

William James in his very interesting book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1971)(4) makes a pithy observation about ‘spirituality’ in terms of religion. He affirms that it refers to an individual’s total reaction upon life. His words deserve mention:

> Religion, whatever it is, is a man’s total reaction upon life so why not say that any total reaction upon life is a religion? Total reactions are different from casual reactions, and total attitudes are different from usual or professional attitudes. To get it at them you must go behind the foreground of existence and reach down to that curious sense of the whole residual cosmos as an ever-lasting presence, intimate or alien, terrible or amusing, lovable or odious, which is in some degree everyone possesses. . . . It expresses our individual sense of it in the most definite way. Why then not call these reactions our religion, no matter what specific character they may have? Non-religious as some of these reactions may be, in one sense of the word “religious,” they yet belong to the general sphere of religious life, and so should generally be classed as religious reactions. (53-54)

In Jamesian terms, the distinction between ‘religion’ and ‘religiousness’ is like the difference between the pole and the pole-star. In other words, spirituality need not have anything to do with the so-called religious people nor does it mean that it is not there in an irreligious individual. The term ‘religion’ requires a different connotation as regards ‘spirituality’ is concerned. A spiritual person has a deep sense of commitment to what is around him.

In accordance to William James’ viewpoint, Amanda Porterfield in her scholarly work *Feminine Spirituality in America: From Sarah Edwards to Martha Graham* (1980)(7), attempts to arrive at a meaningful definition of the term ‘Feminine Spirituality’. She states:

> Spirituality refers to personal attitudes toward life, attitudes that engage an individual’s deepest feelings and most fundamental beliefs. It encompasses the religious attitudes and experiences of the individuals and May often be used as a synonym for religiousness. But, spirituality covers a larger area than that staked out by religion because it does not require belief in God or commitment to institutional forms of worship. (6)

Amanda refers to the book *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* by Catharine Beecher (1800-1878), a teacher, activist, and writer and in the book she argues for the importance of “women’s work” and the female role in society. The book written in 1841 is said to be the first American complete guide to housekeeping and was the first of Catharine’s well respected essays on female domesticity. It was considered unique at the time because it combined all aspects of domestic living into one single volume. It was also the most notable of the early analyses on the psychology of domesticity and its impact on the community at large, as well at within the home. Amanda views that Beecher celebrates woman’s moral superiority while the book talks about spirituality in America. She continues to record:

> This is not a book about everyone's spirituality in America. It is a study of a spiritual tradition identified by feminine attitudes and expressions. The first thesis of this book is that femininity characterizes a powerful and lasting tradition of spirituality in America. . . . As for what ‘femininity’ means the reader will find no a priori definition . . . . it refers to attitudes and experiences that are perceived to characterize women. However, one understands femininity that understanding grows out of one’s observation and study of women. . . . The women whose lives have attracted my study have reminded me, by some personal characteristic, vocational dilemmas, or image held sacred, of one another. . . . [They] have been selected not because they represent “typical” spiritual consciousness as in a demographic survey, but because they illustrate spiritual consciousness in vivid and distinctive ways . . . . display personality characteristics and devotional attitudes that represent a gallery of spiritual types. (6-8)
Amanda seems to succeed in making the reader understand what ‘Feminine Spirituality’ is. Femininity and spirituality neither are not monolithic concepts nor are they points of view unaffected by historical changes. Adaptability, in fact, is an essential feature common to both femininity and spirituality. Feminine Spirituality cannot be conceptualized and it can be understood only through illustrations, and obviously, it can be identified within the sphere of religion, especially an aspirant’s devotion to a personal God. Though various instances effectively highlight this unique experience, focus on just one mode of understanding can be made, namely, that of “Domestic-Consciousness”.

‘Feminine Spirituality’ has involved the creation and maintenance of ‘home-life’ as much as it has involved the capacity to receive authority. It involves the competence to sacralize space or, in other words, an intuitive aesthetic sensitivity to environmental spaces, or sensitivity which may be termed ‘Domestic Consciousness’. Women have often been tied to their domestic life because of the restrictions of single family or home. However, in some women this ‘domestic consciousness’ operates as an expansive spirituality, extending beyond the four walls of a home to a commitment to a larger human family, to an attention to social and environmental spaces, and to an artistic appreciation of the human soul as itself a household. The term ‘veedu’ in Tamil means both the house and the moksa, and ‘veedu peru adaithal’ – deliverance – means to receive the benediction to construct the Home.

‘Aesthetics of Feminine Spirituality’ engages in seeing how the mechanics of poetry help the demonstration of domestic consciousnesses. With ‘veedu’ as thematic structure, we can see that two sets of different patterns are in operation:

1. The male-male pattern – that is – the male in his own gender-self talking about deliverance – this is a highly intellectualized mode.
2. The male-female pattern – the male assuming the role of a woman – the deliverance is the emotional union with his personal God. The language, though charged with high emotions, is not totally a woman’s voice. The male voice can also be identified.

In apposition to this is another pair of patterns:

3. The female-female pattern – the female in her own gender-self talks about the Deliverance. This also is in an intellectualized language, but unlike the male-male pattern with its dry-as-dust philosophy.
4. The female-male pattern – here the deliverance must be achieved at all costs by even becoming violent. Emotions are in the highest pitch. A total woman’s voice – unlike that of the male-female pattern – is heard with its uninhibited male aggressiveness.

These binaries are juxtaposed in order to arrive at a working definition of the phrase ‘Feminist Aesthetics’. The practitioners – male or female - have to inevitably opt the opposite voice and use a terminology in tune with the progression of the self in the path of deliverance.

‘Feminist Aesthetics’, then, can be safely built around the ancient concept of androgyyny. At this point, the reader is reminded of Virginia Woolf’s observations on ‘androgyrynous mind’ as she critiques Coleridge’s view. She records:

The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two [man and woman] live in harmony together, spiritually cooperating. . . . Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgyynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. . . . He meant perhaps, that the androgyynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmitsemotion without impediment; that it is naturall creative, incandescent and undivided. (A Room of One’s Own, 97)(8)

Woolf evidently indicates to the vital attitude that a creative writer should possess. Further references for ‘androgyryn’ can be considered. Carolynn Heilbrun in her Toward a Recognition of Androgyyn argues that androgyyn suggests “ a spirit of reconciliation between the sexes; further, a full range of experience open to individuals who may as women, be aggressive, as men, tender; it suggests a spectrum upon which human beings choose their places without regards to propriety or custom”. (qtd by Susan Kress, 102)(6). She adds further that the “vital women” need “to find appropriate public channels for their energy”. (6) That is, the ‘vital women’ must be at once assertive and affectionate and such a disposition plainly gets well-expressed in ‘Feminine Spirituality’.

Hester Eisenstein, Professor of Sociology, in her edited work The Future of Difference (2), offers yet another dimension to the concept of androgyyn her finding is based on the androgyynous personality scale planned out by Sandra Bem in her “Bem Sex Role Inventory – BSRI”. The well-adjusted androgyynous person registered on the scale possesses “the full range of so-called female qualities – nurturance, compassion, tenderness, sensitivity, affiliativeness, cooperativeness – along with the full range of so-called masculine qualities – aggressiveness,
leadership, initiative, competitiveness – all at the same time”. Sandra Bem forwards an observation in her manual:

The concept of psychological androgyny implies that it is possible for an individual to be both compassionate and assertive, both expressive and instrumental, both feminine and masculine, depending upon the situational appropriateness of these various modalities. And it further implies that an individual may even blend these complementary modalities in a single act, such as the ability to fire an employee, if the circumstances warrant it, but with sensitivity for the human emotion that such an act inevitably produces. (1)

The Bem Sex-Role Inventory is a measure of masculinity-femininity and gender roles to assess how people identify themselves psychologically. BSRI is an attempt to examine psychological androgyny and provide empirical evidence to show the advantage of a shared masculine and feminine personality versus a sex-typed categorization. This empirical investigation can be made use of to scrutinize the self’s spiritual leanings too.

The foregone propositions postulate a framework for “Aesthetics of Feminine Spirituality” comprising these aspects:

1. Spirituality is concerned with ‘religiousness’ and not ‘religion’.
2. Femininity within the realms of spiritual, is a neutral term.
3. ‘Feminine Spirituality’, by and large, involves ‘Domestic Consciousness’.
4. The two sets of binaries suggest a definite ‘Feminist Aesthetics’ spectrum, and
5. The principle of ‘Androgyny’ seems to be the best mode to construct a well-defining ‘Feminist Aesthetics’ concept.

Indian devotional literature has proved that ‘femininity’ is not the strict domain of women. To delineate their ineffable impressions, the male-poets have ‘become’ women and poeticized their longings in ‘nayika bhava’, popularly known as ‘Bridal Mysticism”. An interesting fact to note is that such spiritual responses happen to the male poets in their utter surrender to a masculine God. The hymns of alvars and nayanmar in Tamil are supreme examples for such a bhava or attitude. Their western counterparts are John Donne, George Herbert, Edward Taylor, Francis Asbury, and Henry Ward Beecher to name a few. These men have joined the tradition of feminine spirituality and have rendered their services to enlarge that empire. The illustrations for the binaries noted above will apparently bolster the concept of ‘Feminist Aesthetics’, which can be discussed in a separate essay.

References