

---

# UNIT 1 FEATURES OF FEMINIST CRITICISM

---

## Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Working Definition
  - 1.2.1 Sex And Gender
  - 1.2.2 Politics And Ideology
- 1.3 Concerns Of Feminist Theories
  - 1.3.1 While Reading
  - 1.3.2 While Writing
- 1.4 Grey Areas
  - 1.4.1 While Practising
  - 1.4.2 While Theorising
- 1.5 Possible Application
- 1.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.7 Glossary
- 1.8 Questions
- 1.9 Suggested Reading

---

## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

---

The primary objective of this unit is to understand the concerns and features of feminist theories. As a means to this end I will look at a working definition of feminist theories so as to examine areas of sensitivity and of difficulty. The consequences of the intervention of feminist theories in the academy and in the world will also be considered.

---

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

---

I'd like to begin by recalling a fragment of a conversation from Jane Austen's last completed novel, *Persuasion*. It is a conversation between two friends, Captain Harville and Anne Elliot on the subject of constancy in love. As you will see, it begins with a reference to Captain Benwick, a common friend of theirs, whose situation they are discussing. It goes on however well beyond the personal. Captain Harville has just tried to tell Anne men's feelings are as strong and long-lasting as women's. Anne has disagreed.

'Well, Miss Elliot...we shall never agree, I suppose, upon this point. No man and woman would, probably. But let me observe that all histories are against you — all stories, prose and verse. If I had such a memory as Benwick, I could bring you fifty quotations in a moment on my side [of] the argument, and I do not think I ever opened a book in my life which had not something to say upon woman's inconstancy. Songs and proverbs all talk of women's fickleness. But, perhaps, you will say, these were all written by men.'

'Perhaps I shall. Yes, yes, if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything.' (*Persuasion* 1088-89)

Quite a few points jump out of this little snatch of conversation. *First* as Captain Harville suggests at the start, there is no beginning and no end to the dialogue between women and men. It is indeed one feature of human existence that cuts across all barriers of time and space. Feminist theories then are one set of manifestations of that dialogue. They do not live — sectioned-off — in a curriculum for you and me to study and teach. They are the blood and bone of life's ongoing debate in all eras and cultures, between as it were 'one half of the sky' and the other. *Next*, the logical development of this line of thought is that feminist theories — however intellectually inaccessible some may seem at first — are not wholly or even largely the concern of the academy. They are illustrations of how the world and the academy intervene in each other's lives. Look at the way in which the conversation veers and swings. Harville and Anne begin with a purely personal concern. Their friend has given up mourning for his dead fiancée and found a new love. But Harville does not let the matter rest here. He goes on to speak of books, their writers and of all those engaged in the arts. He moves, in other words, from the world of ordinary life to the academy in which literature is taught, assessed and marketed. Harville and Anne go back (after the extract cited here) to talk of the personal once more. *Thus* this suggests the way in which feminist theories 'happen'. For instance, the critical establishment for a very long time said that Austen (though she lived through the Napoleonic wars) never alluded to the 'great world outside' and wrote only about the sheltered world of family life. Yet look at how revolutionary ideas are quietly being nudged into place here. The notions that the literary establishment is not just male but likely to be male-biased as well, that women have been historically disadvantaged because education, history and literature have always been the preserve, and that therefore the academy (which produces and disseminates these studies) is suspect, are the stuff of which women's revolutions have been made. *All* these notions are articulated in this conversation.

Sometimes a revolution may happen in an obviously public arena: the Votes for Women movement in the Britain of the 1920's or the campaign for parliamentary seats for women in the India of the 1990's. At other times it may happen quietly in the give-and-take of a private conversation. That feminist theories seem to go underground at times, or speak largely in private space, is itself a comment on the way in which women have been silenced or marginalised at all times and in all places. *Also* look at the specifically literary aspects considered here. Literature concerns both women and men. So it is not only a case of men imbibing its gender-biases but also of women writers and readers being unknowingly conditioned by these biases. In this context therefore Anne is right to rule out an unmediated, *ad hoc* use of literature as a key to understanding life. Feminist theories try to identify such biases and then negotiate them by sensitising readers to their existence and organising strategies of resistance against such biases. *Besides*, examine the tone of this exchange again. Yes, the man and the woman are in an adversarial relationship in terms of ideas, but no, there is no hostility. Does this context of friendship help advance the feminist argument through means of friendly persuasion or does it retard the argument since persuasion can reduce radicalism? Woolf for instance [see 3.4.2] is criticised for using persuasive, feminine charm to win over her readers. Logically, if culture-conditioning is granted, the debate is not between women and men, but between feminists and anti-feminists. *Finally* look once more at the conversation, not for the tone this time but for the structure, or the way in which it orders its thoughts. At the molecular level — the level of the sentence — do you think you would know it was written by a woman if you had no prior information that the author is Austen? Some theorists claim there is such a thing as 'a woman's sentence.' It is shaped so as to be deliberately personal, supple and easy as a response to the more public, ponderous and relatively hostile sentence of a man. Others suggest this kind of discrimination is itself an extension of gender-bias. What do *you* think?

## 1.2 WORKING DEFINITION

### 1.2.1 Components: Sex and gender

I wouldn't like to offer you — even if I could construct it — a hard and fast definition of the nature of feminist theories. That would set parameters to an experience which I still think is exciting because its chief business is the stretching of parameters and the disturbing of received wisdom. I wouldn't wish, so to speak, to domesticate the terror. At the same time I would like to suggest some areas and sensitivities peculiar to feminist theories, and to play around with some of the applications of these theories. So I shall try to put two working definitions before you. Consider their areas of clarity and put question-marks over their areas of confusion. Here is the first:

...feminism is a political perception based on two fundamental premises: (1) that gender difference is the foundation of a structural inequality between women and men, by which women suffer systematic social injustice, and (2) that the inequality between the sexes is not the result of biological necessity but is produced by the cultural construction of gender differences. This perception provides feminism with its double agenda: to understand the social and psychic mechanisms that construct and perpetuate gender inequality and then to change them. (Morris, 1)

Please set aside the word 'political' for the moment [I will discuss it 1.2.2] and focus on the paired concepts of sex and gender. Sex here refers to the determining of identity on the basis of biological category, while gender connotes 'the cultural meaning attached to sexual identity.' In other words, gender is the product of culture-conditioning. Thus women may be stereotyped as being compelled to have certain 'womanly' qualities which restrict them to a subordinate role. Celia in *Middlemarch* finds happiness much quicker than Dorothea since for her life centres around her own hearth and home like that of a much-petted kitten. Dorothea steps out of the role nineteenth-century English provincial life offers her by trying to enter the homes of others, as a social worker or would-be architect. As a result her own home-centred happiness is that much harder to find. Sex-difference (the notion of the woman as reproducer) sanctions gender-difference (the notion that a woman must set up a family as her chief priority) which in turn requires punishment. *Middlemarch* society is that much more harsh to Dorothea because of her refusal to conform.

This is heart-rending. Simultaneously however even as feminist theorising — the sex-gender distinction in this case — uncovers these biases in cultural history, by drawing the attention of readers to these biases it helps resist them. Eliot's own conclusion to the novel can be read as a sell-out to culture-conditioning. Dorothea is perhaps the only one to believe in her own happiness. The remake of *Middlemarch* for BBC television in the 1990's though was interesting because it showed a conclusion more resistant to gender-bias. The visuals were those of provincial placid society and against this the conclusion of the novel was read out in a voice-over. This suggested an author disturbed and disappointed by her society. The priority of making readers uncover hidden biases in a text and in a sense thus re-writing a text is part of the revisionary imperative (or the need to bring about change) that is crucial to feminist theories.

### 1.2.2 Components: Politics and Ideology

How are such biases created and sustained? More specifically what are the institutions that make gender-bias possible? The conversation cited in 1.1 referred to education, history and literature. If these forces are put together they suggest the collective presence of the academy: the collective term to describe the study,

teaching and publishing of the arts and the sciences. Feminist theories range themselves against various structures and inter-relationships of power — the state, the church, law and the academy — which they see as patriarchal. To be patriarchal is to sustain and act out the belief that both nature and culture make men superior to women. To combat patriarchy — which may be the basis of many institutions — is to call for action as the definition in 1.2.1 does. The definition I am going to put before you now, I think, sets out some of the action itself.

The first step is to recognise that politics is not the sole preserve of professionals called politicians. On the contrary ... 'everything is politics,' especially those things which claim or are claimed to be apolitical like those 'truths' which great literature is said to embody, and which still get labelled 'universal' .... 'Politics' in this wider sense means 'power' or rather 'power relations': who does what to whom and in whose interests. And because human relationships are necessarily interpersonal, 'the personal is the political' ... to read a canonical text in a feminist way is to force that text to reveal its hidden sexual ideology ... (Ruthven 30-1)

I will try to apply these ideas to a novel you have studied so as to clarify them. *Tom Jones* is — among other things — about a hero's quest for wisdom symbolised in the name of the heroine Sophia (meaning wisdom) whom he ultimately marries. A man's quest for wisdom is usually presented as a universal truth about life. Here it takes on the added dimension of the personal — a lover's quest for his beloved. Supposing though I argue that it is not universal and not merely personal but political, I could say it deals with patriarchal structures of power and the relationships between them. I might say that Fielding's readers (both women and men) demanded novels that re-inforced the gender-stereotypes that men can experiment but women must conform. Fielding's publisher (according to this reading) would want to give the readers what the latter would like to buy and read. So of course Fielding the writer creates a loving, patient, wise woman and a man who is eternally forgiven. Thus structures of power — which are therefore described as political — operate to re-inforce gender-stereotypes. They compel readers, writers and publishers to demand and produce such stereotypes endlessly. Unless alerted by feminist theorists subsequent readers of the text — who may go on to teach and prescribe it — will share its own inadequacies and ideology. 'Ideology is that never fully articulated system of assumptions by which a society operates, and which permeates everything it produces, including of course what is deemed to be literature' (Ruthven, 31). At which points can feminist theories engage with patriarchal ideology so as to challenge it? Are these areas themselves problematic?

---

## 1.3 CONCERNS OF FEMINIST THEORIES

---

### 1.3.1 While reading

Reading — which includes studying and teaching — is a cultural practice organised and mediated by the academy. The academy controls reading by means of the syllabus it constructs. This syllabus reflects in turn the canon: the body of texts it values enough to recommend. Like all other structures of power, the canon projects and confirms the cultural biases of those who construct it. '... canons are complicit with power; and canons are useful in that they enable us to handle otherwise unmanageable historical deposits. They do this by affirming that some works are more valuable than others, more worthy of minute attention ...' (Walder, 18). In 1.2.2, I suggested how patriarchy might influence and shape a single text. Now try to imagine how patriarchy might determine a body of texts down the ages. It might suggest that only texts which had an arbitrarily determined value — say in terms of

grandeur or length — ought to be included. This in turn would ensure the inclusion of certain genres such as the epic — with its emphasis on public action and high cultural significance — and the exclusion of others — the short story, say, with its emphasis on private space and domesticity. Now try to think of what this exclusion means. Traditionally women have used the short story which requires a brief absence only from work, and a (relatively) less formal or 'classical' education which have frequently been all they can afford. The exclusion of a genre in which women have often been ahead of men is only one way in which the canon confirms patriarchy. Try now to think of other ways. The canon may include in a syllabus only texts of confirmed 'greatness' as compulsory and include women's writing in an optional paper which may be omitted. In this course you and I are lucky to have a 'well-established' romantic like Wordsworth along with Wollstonecraft who is one of those rescued from oblivion by feminist theorists and almost forcibly brought to the notice of the academy. Feminist theories try to 'take over' the canon and rescue it from patriarchy by helping readers scan texts, genres or movements so as to relentlessly make visible the components of gender and gender-bias in the academy which has so far tried to conceal them.

### 1.3.2 While writing

The best-known articulation of this problem comes from Elizabeth Barrett Browning a Victorian poet who said in 1845 'England has had many learned women ... and yet where are the poetesses? ... I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none' (Walder 27). Another poet Emily Dickinson lamented over a similar problem in the United States of 1862 'They shut me up in Prose — As when a little Girl / They put me in the closet / Because they liked me "still"' (ibid). There are *two* problems with reference to these gaps in literary ancestry. For *one* thing it can make women writers feel at a disadvantage when compared to their male counterparts because to not feel part of a tradition can breed a sense of impoverishment and deprivation. As a contemporary poet Adrienne Rich complains 'this is one of the ways ... in which women's work and thinking has been made to seem sporadic, errant, orphaned of any tradition of its own' (Ruthven 124). For *another*, movements lose their radical capacity for change when they are made to seem sporadic and unorganised. As Dickinson points out, to be restricted to a genre which is not of one's choice — prose as against verse in her case — is to reduce a writer's potential for creatively rebellious writing. By rewriting histories of literature so as to free these of gender bias, by reconstructing syllabi (so that say, Premchand and Ismat Chughtai get read in a course on Indian writing), by retrieving genres in which women have excelled (diary-writing, the short story) and by publishing women's writing (the Virago Press in the U.K, the Feminist Press in the U.S and Kali for Women in India, to name a few) feminist theories create a space for women writers.

---

## 1.4 GREY AREAS IN FEMINIST THEORIES

---

### 1.4.1 While Practising

There are certain areas which are problematic or grey areas in feminist theories. Ought these theories to be applied across all cultures? After all women as a class account for at least fifty percent of all cultures and there is an irreducible minimum of women's experience common to all times and places. At the same time is it not culturally unacceptable to market theory constructed by the Western academy as if it is equally valid across the Indian subcontinent as if theory were another multinational product? Look at the following remark: 'How then, can one learn from and speak to the millions of illiterate rural and urban women who live "in the pores of" capitalism inaccessible to the capitalist dynamics that allow us our shared channels of communication, the definition of common enemies?' (Morris 175).

Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak, who made this comment has been herself described as a 'Marxist feminist American academic, trained in literary deconstruction, [who] was born in India, and thus writes at the intersection of cultural and intellectual tensions' (Morris 166). In other words the experience of women is not wholly the same across all cultures. Some cultures are capitalistic or free-enterprise cultures which provide the illusion at least of choice. Others are state controlled. Literacy levels vary both within and across cultures. Feminist theorists approach the discipline from a variety of other theoretical backgrounds [of which more will be said in 1.4.2] All these points suggest that no easy essentialism should enter feminist criticism or create a totalising narrative that wipes out cultural difference or even set up the experience of the Western academy as normative. At the same time this problem should not inhibit theorists or cause theory to retreat. For to do this would mean that the very conspiracy of silence patriarchy creates around genres, movements or cultures that are women-centred will be continued. Feminist theories I think should articulate such silences. Even if it means acknowledging they cannot speak *for* or *to* a culture with any great authority, they should speak *of* it however haltingly. What do *you* feel?

### 1.4.2 While theorising

Feminist criticism — like other forms of literary theory — relates across critical boundaries as well. Simone de Beauvoir always claimed for instance that as a marxist she was primarily interested in a class-based analysis which treated women as a class among the oppressed all over the world rather than in the condition of women in itself. New historicists — of whose work Edward Said's *Orientalism* is an example — have a vexed relationship with feminist theories. On the *one* hand a colleague of Said's found it useful to build a parallel between his work and hers: 'I realised, in reading his book that ... far more than Arabs internalised the western view [of their inferiority] women have internalised the male view of themselves' (Showalter 26). On the *other* Aijaz Ahmad a marxist has criticised Said for limiting his focus to race while erasing class and gender as factors of oppression. Feminist theories then, cannot only develop an ethic of suffering. They must think, intervene and reshape the academy and the world.

---

## 1.5 POSSIBLE APPLICATION

---

Now turn to the poem by Kamala Das please and give it a quick read, keeping in mind the theoretical issues discussed in this unit. For instance take a look at the opening: 'I don't know politics but I know the names / Of those in power, and can repeat them like / Days of the week or names of months, beginning with / Nehru ... I think the ironic opening (along with the title) works on the level of an ironic disclaimer. It sets itself out as an introduction to the woman writer but immediately suggests how apart from the public arena is the private world of the woman writer. Look at the way the problems of cultural difference appear. 'I am Indian, very brown born in / Malabar I speak three languages, write in / Two, dream in one...' An inhabitant of this world of power-structures (the world of politics) is a mockery of meaning as a mindless catalogue of days or months would be. The woman writer is condemned to a history she has not helped shape by an education she has not had, isn't she? Look also at the relationship indicated between sex and gender. Sex is the category based on natural or biological instinct: 'I was child and later they / Told me I grew for I became tall ...' In contrast gender is a culture-conditioned construct which has everything to do with the expectations and rules imposed by society on the individual 'I wore a shirt and my / Brother's trousers, cut my hair short...' I think the pressures of the academy are worked in rather cleverly. A chorus of self-styled literary critics try to tell poet the way in which she should position herself. 'Be Amy, or be Kamala or better / Still, be Madhavikutty ...' Each of these literary identities

has specific choices and implications which shape it, I think there is the western role-model, the autobiographical *and* the poet who writes in the regional language respectively mentioned here. The poet thus finds people attempting to choose her literary ancestors for her, and this choice in its turn is an effort to force her present and future into manageable categories. How do you think a patriarchy pressures the individual woman writer in this poem to conform? See 1.3.2 for the parallel with any of the poets cited there and also look out for the pun on 'still' (don't move *and* don't rebel) which is the same as that in the quotation from Dickinson.

---

## 1.6 LET US SUM UP

---

Feminist theories begin — it seems to me — as one manifestation of an ongoing dialogue between women and men. They illustrate the way in which the world and the academy intervene in the lives and processes of each other. The revolutions that make feminist theories possible (and vice versa) do not always happen in the public domain. Education, history and literature — which are public institutions have belonged to men for much longer than to women. Feminist literary theories identify the gender-biases of literature and thus help both women and men defeat these biases by reading against them. The argument is not so much between women and men as it is between feminists and anti-feminists. One pair of components recurring in feminist theories is that of sex (based on biological difference) and gender (the result of culture-conditioning). Politics refers to the power structures feminist theories try to combat and ideology to the invisible but inherent theoretical assumptions that govern a society. Patriarchy is the ideology committed to male supremacy and is combated by feminist theories which show up gender biases in the reading and writing of literatures. Feminist theories negotiate problems of cultural difference and of relationship with other forms of criticism such as marxism and new historicism. These use class and race respectively as means to scan literature rather than gender.

---

## 1.7 GLOSSARY

---

Aesthetic of suffering:

The reduction of women to the status of passive victims

Orientalism:

Said's coinage to describe the reductive way in which the West has represented the East so as to colonise and exploit it

---

## 1.8 QUESTIONS

---

- Q1. Outline the structures of power mentioned in the conversation between Anne Elliot and Captain Harville [1.1] that feminist theories challenge.
- Q2. What are the implications of the distinction between sex and gender as set by feminist theories?
- Q3. Use 'An Introduction' to discuss the problems faced by feminist theories.

---

## 1.9 SUGGESTED READING

---

Ruthven, K.K. *Feminist literary studies: an Introduction*. 1984, repr. Cambridge, C.U.P., 1990.

Morris, Pam. *Literature and Feminism: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993.

Walder, Dennis (ed.) *Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays and Documents*. Oxford: O.U.P., 1990.

---

## UNIT 2 MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT: A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN

---

### Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Social And Cultural Background
  - 2.2.1 Of the age
  - 2.2.2 Position of women
- 2.3 The text
  - 2.3.1 Its constituency
  - 2.3.2 Its content
- 2.4 Its contribution
  - 2.4.1 In its time
  - 2.4.2 Subsequently
- 2.5 Possible application
- 2.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.7 Glossary
- 2.8 Questions
- 2.9 Suggested Reading

---

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

---

The *main* objective of this unit is to use Chapter VI of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as a point of entry into a discussion of feminist texts. I *also* wish to use it as a space within which to analyse the three-way relationship between individualism, feminism and socialism.

---

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

---

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) belonged to a circle of intellectuals in London who were active supporters of revolutionary ideals and fervour. Under the leadership of Richard Price (1723-1791) they upheld the secession of the American colonies from British rule in 1775 and also supported the ideals of the French Revolution of 1789. The group was influenced by the idealist seventeenth century English philosopher John Locke. Locke's empiricism had led him to postulate that individuals are born free, are subject to reason and the law of moral behaviour. Government by the state should be minimal and should be seen as a public service. The Lockean legacy of persuasion by an appeal to reason, I think, colours Wollstonecraft's own work. Her first publication was on the same subject to which she would return in 'Vindication', namely, the education of women. This was titled *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and was followed by *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790) in which she supported the cause of the French revolution. The text with which you and I are concerned was published two years after that. Wollstonecraft married William Goodwin, also a revolutionary thinker, in 1797. Her important books however predate their marriage. See what you make of the following account of Mary Wollstonecraft and her circle.

These thinkers may be called the radical heirs of the Lockean natural rights school. They used Lockean arguments to demand full equality of civil and political rights and the abolition of all aristocratic privileges which interfered with the operation of equality of opportunity in the sense of careers open to talents. They were middle-class democrats with an individualist social and political theory (Charvet, 15).

*First*, notice the way in which (it is said) the radicalism of Wollstonecraft and her group was tempered by Locke's commitment to reason and natural behaviour. *Next* notice that a claim is being made for equality of opportunity based on equality of value. The underlying logic runs like this: all people — regardless of class or gender — are equally open to reason and therefore have an equal right to be treated rationally. *Then* keep an eye open for the equation being worked out between individual happiness and the good of society. *Finally* be alive to the way in which the class-specific nature of Wollstonecraft and her peers might have reduced their radicalism. This is a criticism you will meet in any discussion of Woolf as well, as 3.4.1 will show. For the moment though, I will try to examine the validity of these arguments against Wollstonecraft's context and text.

---

## 2.2 SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

---

### 2.2.1 The Age

Perhaps the most exhilarating description of this age is that given by Wordsworth.

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive  
But to be young was very Heaven ! O times  
In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways  
Of custom, law and stature, took at once  
The attraction of a country in romance !  
When Reason seem the most to assert her rights,  
When most intent on making of herself  
A prime enchantress — to assist the work,  
Which then was going forward in her name !  
(*Prelude*, ix, 108-116)

The American Revolution had first alerted England to the stirrings of nationalism when the thirteen colonies had banded together to secede from England, hitherto the mother-country. 'It was a civil war, not a war between two nations, though when the battle-smoke subsided two nations were standing there erect' (Trevelyan, 554). The spirit of liberation was further strengthened by the French Revolution which had as its stated idea's liberty, equality and fraternity. If you look at the first extract from the *Prelude* where Wordsworth speaks of the newly-established French Republic — you will I think find that he is enthusiastic about the liberation of the spirit that he associates with the overthrow of the old order in France. The old order or *ancien regime* as it was known comprised the monarchy, the Roman Catholic Church and the aristocracy. At the same time you will notice the way in which Wordsworth is very clear that the spirit of revolution and the spirit of reason go hand in hand. On the level of theory many thinkers in Europe believed passionately in the alliance of these forces.

It was this belief in the power of reason to bring about social revolution that helps explain the proliferation of books on the subject of education since — if reason could accomplish so much — it was logical that people's minds should be trained to make them obedient to reason. Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Emile* are both concerned with the theme of education and the training of the mind.

Wollstonecraft's 'Vindication' is at least in part a reaction to the latter since it is concerned specifically with the education of women as Rousseau's text is concerned with that of men.

### 2.2.2 Position of Women

It was Rousseau who had set out the following plan for the education of women, which is an indication of their position in society: 'For my part, I would have a young Englishwoman cultivate her agreeable talents in order to lease her future husband with as much care and assiduity as a young Circassian cultivates hers, to fit her for the harem of a Circassian bashaw' (Wollstonecraft, 95). In other words middle and upper-middle class women could aspire at the most to an education that would prepare them for a companionate marriage. This was a marriage in which the wife — as Rousseau suggests here — would be trained to be a pleasant companion for her husband just as in the Middle East women were trained to be members of a harem who would please the pasha (bashaw) or ruler.

Women writers in general and novelists in particular were yet to come. In other chapters of 'Vindication' it is clear that one of Wollstonecraft's problems is that she has hardly any women writers whom she can cite with respect. She dismisses Hester Piozzi and Madame de Staël as undervaluing supporters of Samuel Johnson and Rousseau — clear victims of conditioning by patriarchy — and finds she has few role-models left to recommend. Catherine Macaulay and Mrs Chapone are the only two precursors on the theme of women's education whom Wollstonecraft can feature with dignity. The depressed condition of women then was marked by an enfeebling education, no career, no economic independence and no sense of a support-network with women achievers. Wollstonecraft's text is, I think, both an *analysis* and a *casualty* of this state of affairs.

---

## 2.3 THE TEXT

---

### 2.3.1 Its Constituency

This dual character of 'Vindication' is immediately apparent in its constituency. By definition — given the appalling contemporary position of women and their lack of education — it is largely men who comprise the circle to which 'Vindication' is designed to appeal. After all it is they — and here lies the bitter irony — who have to be rationally persuaded to grant women the rights which are their due. The text is dedicated to Bishop Talleyrand of France for whose work on education and on civil liberties Wollstonecraft has great respect. She writes to persuade him — and other like-minded men — that 'when men contend for their freedom and [demand] to be allowed to judge for themselves respecting their own freedom and [demand] to be allowed to judge for themselves respecting their own happiness, it ...[is] inconsistent and unjust to subjugate women, even though you firmly believe that you are acting in the manner best calculated to promote their happiness' (Wollstonecraft, 11).

Wollstonecraft's text is addressed to women in the sense that it concerns their rights and education. It is an open question *however* as to how sympathetic her early women readers found this text.

I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and happiness consists, I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body .... [and] to show that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object

of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being regardless of the distinction of sex ... (Wollstonecraft 5).

How persuasive do you think Wollstonecraft's first women readers found her? I wonder if they found her hatchet-job on the education they had received helpful because it tried to be *diagnostic* or hard to take when it was *prescriptive*. Unlike the theorists at whom you and I will look, Wollstonecraft cannot rely on a ready-to-hand audience of women such as Woolf (3.3.1) or Showalter (5.3.1) can and do marshal. I think this lack of a readymade constituency makes Wollstonecraft perhaps write more consciously against the grain than she might otherwise need to and this in turn makes her perhaps a thought more prescriptive than persuasive. What do *you* think?

### 2.3.2 Its Content

The thesis of Chapter VI is clear from its title which states that an early association of ideas has upon the character. Consequently, says Wollstonecraft, education is integral to the development of individual identity so that this dependence of the mind on associations and impressions needs the rigorous discipline of education if it is to be anything other than slavish. This need for education is even more compelling in the case of women than it is for men. Women do not have the subsequent access to a career or to business that men have and are hence more bound in an irrational way to first impressions. Untutored as women's minds are, they exist in a state of ignorance and slavish dependence on external circumstances and associations. Far from seeing the world in the clear light of reason women are condemned to the enfeebling darkness of bondage to external reality. When women are young and ought to be rationally educated they are taught only superficial graces to please their future husbands. Conversely when they are adults and mature, they are again fobbed off with useless trivia and encouraged to be immature of understanding. '...females who are made women of when they are mere children, and brought back to childhood when they ought to leave the go-cart for ever, have not sufficient strength to efface the superinductions of art that have smothered nature.' This hypothesis is heavily dependent on contemporary philosophy specifically on that of Locke and (more immediately) David Hartley. Hartley (1705-57) sought an explanation for the problems of the mind in the force of reason. His theory of the *association of ideas* developed the argument that linkages between external circumstances — made by the mind — shaped the identity of an individual. As the opening pages of Chapter VI of 'Vindication' suggest, Wollstonecraft relies heavily on the primacy of reason and on associationism. She sees reason as an integral part of nature, including human nature. Wollstonecraft outgrows, I think, the paradigm of the eighteenth century when she uses associationist psychology as the groundwork of her revolution for women's rights. Wollstonecraft builds on this groundwork with data from *two* sources. The *first* is *contemporary literature*.

The cultural stereotypes generated by literature are shown up in all their impoverishment. The Restoration cult of the rake is shown to do unlimited damage. The Restoration represented in theatre as being a licentious person at heart who conceals his emotional hollowness by using wit as a means of economic and emotional advancement in the world. Ultimately the reformed rake is shown to make the best husband. He preserves his composure and wins the hand of the rich and virtuous heroine. Further, the novel of the age of sensibility had further complicated matters, by re-using the stereotype of the rake with a perverse twist. Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747-48) is a novel which portrays the endurance of its virtuous heroine through a series of oppressions climaxing in her self-sacrificial death. *Clarissa's* father is tyrannical and her society and suitor alike are hypocritical. When Lovelace the rake appears he seems to both *Clarissa* and the reader to offer a welcome escape. Despite his attractiveness he, too, however is exploitative and

contributes to the confusion and the destruction of the heroine. Wollstonecraft quotes Lovelace as an instance of the destructive potential within the figure of the rake. Why does contemporary literature strike Wollstonecraft as pernicious to the cause of women? One reason I think is that whether in its creation of stereotypes or in stray remarks such as that of Pope — it seems to her to promote unthinking antipathy and hostility to women as a reflex action. The more important reason I suspect is related to the *second* source of her data namely her *observation of ordinary life*. This causes her to reflect on how easily men and women form incorrect ideas of each other and of their roles in life. Look at this extract:

Men look for beauty and the simper of good-humoured docility: women are captivated by easy manners; a gentleman-like man seldom fails to please them, and their thirsty ears eagerly drink the insinuating nothings of politeness, whilst they turn from the unintelligible sounds of the charmer-reason, charm he never so wisely.

Quite a few points seem to be hammered home here. Indeed the extract seems to me to be the essay in miniature. *First* there is the question of gender-stereotyping which results in a culture generating the images by which it deludes itself. Encouraged by social conditioning (perhaps on account of faulty culture-conditioning and education) both men and women look out for the wrong things in each other. Men look for a veneer of attraction that covers docility. Women, more prone to deception on account of their faulty education and on account of poor-quality literature look for men with the appearance and manners of gentlemen but not men of any real worth. *Next* the gaps in both the system of education and in literature stand revealed by the test of actual-life experience. *Finally* women are deafened both by bad education and bad literature to the call of reason which means that knowledge of reality is both denied to them and therefore denied by them as well.

Think for a minute — if you would like to understand this argument in another way — of *Pride and Prejudice* (1817) written within twenty years of Wollstonecraft's text. It offers the reader some clear examples of the way in which gender-stereotyping deludes and damages men and women. There is Mr. Bennet who 'captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour which youth and beauty generally give marries an unbelievably silly woman who destroys the happiness of others.' There is Lydia who — fooled by an appearance of smartness thanks to his uniform — is seduced by Wickham. A defective education is thus the root-cause of a great many social and personal problems. Indeed the novel I think is a good illustration of Wollstonecraft's thesis.

---

## 2.4 ITS CONTRIBUTION

---

### 2.4.1 Immediately

Since the immediate context of 'Vindication' is that of revolution, it must be examined with this in mind. Please allow me the space for an extended quotation to support this statement.

For Mary Wollstonecraft, and those of her contemporaries who were concerned with the status of women, women's rights were seen in the context of human rights in general. Men and women alike must be involved in revolution. The ideals of liberty and equality were thought to apply to both men and women. If fraternity made all men brothers, then men must recognise that they had sisters as well. Socialism and feminism were, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, inextricably linked; and Mary Wollstonecraft was a pioneer of such joint ideals. The practical attempts at communal living, the visions of a new society where labour and power were evenly

distributed, all those social experiments which came after the 'Vindication' had, as their common theme, the prospect of *all* human beings living in friendly equality with each other. In order to eliminate existing inequalities, distinctions of wealth, of class and of gender must all be equally abolished. (Wollstonecraft, vii)

What are the points being made here about the immediate impact of the text? *First* there is the sense that Wollstonecraft's concern for women's rights is a subset of the issue of human rights. Women's rights are to be seen not in a compartment of their own but as part of the ongoing movement for general human emancipation of which the American and French Revolutions are other examples. *Next* there is the related point of the nexus between the campaign for equality in gender-based issues (feminism) and class-based issues (socialism). *Then* there is the sense — and this ties up with all that has gone before — that by definition there cannot be one kind of revolution without another taking place as well. For instance, one of the great concerns of Romanticism which is to literature what the French Revolution is to history is the setting up of an ideal society where all distinctions will be wiped out and all will labour for common happiness. People from completely different cultures — Coleridge, Thoreau and Gandhi — have shared this vision and it is one that has to include equal opportunities for women.

I have mixed feelings about this approach to feminism. On the *one* hand I agree that it is integral to any social utopia and has to be seen as part of the ongoing struggle for human rights and liberation. On the *other* hand I wonder if this merger does not lose feminism its cutting-edge. What do *you* think?

#### 2.4.2 Subsequently

Wollstonecraft's crusade for an enabling education for women continues to be a major theme in feminist theories if by education we mean not just a classroom and examinations but the broader notion of social conditioning. In her own country, the 1870's saw an explosion in the field of women's education with the founding of public schools for women and the establishment of women's colleges in London, Oxford and Cambridge. It was precisely this constituency of educated middle-class women which was represented and used by Virginia Woolf.

To my mind though there is a large area of women's experience which Wollstonecraft does not discuss: the area outside marriage. Wollstonecraft's *sense* of the norm is that of a middle-class woman being better trained so as to be a more fitting helpmeet. In other words her ideal is still that of the companionate marriage. But what about areas of experience that lie outside this ideal? What about cultures where this is not the norm but the exception? And here I am not thinking of the career-woman for whom subsequent theories have space. I'm thinking of the subsistence-level uneducated woman who is very often — on the Indian subcontinent --- the breadwinner in her family.

Ultimately how does Wollstonecraft's theory work for *you*? Does it give you enough leverage to open new and exciting areas of experience or is it too much a product of its own time and place to do that?

---

### 2.5 POSSIBLE APPLICATION

---

I'll focus here on one specific issue: the conclusion of the poem by Das:

...I am sinner, / I am saint. I am the beloved and the / Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no / Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I' (ll. 56-9).

It seems to me that the dichotomy in the approach to the question of women's identity — which is very much part of Wollstonecraft's work — appears here. On the *one* hand Reason suggests that women's welfare is part of the common weal. The tragedy that women are denied their rights is part of the tragedy of the suppression of human and individual rights. On the *other* hand, if this is so, how can women's experience retain its claim to difference, to uniqueness which gives it the ability to name and identify itself? What seem to you to be the premises of identity for women's issues? And what happens if (as in this poem) these premises are not found within a companionate marriage?

---

## 2.6 LET US SUM UP

---

Mary Wollstonecraft went further than her contemporaries in late eighteenth-century England by demanding that the twin values of reason and revolution which they cherished be applied to the cause of women's education. Given that the association of ideas shapes individual identity Wollstonecraft argues that education is essential to train the minds of women away from enslavement to early impressions. She highlights the inferiority of contemporary literature and life to show that defective education of women is the cause of social and personal ills. Wollstonecraft's work is typical of its age and culture. It illustrates the nexus between early socialism and feminism but ultimately seems to demand equality for women mainly as a means to an end — that of the companionate marriage — rather than as an end in itself.

---

## 2.7 GLOSSARY

---

|                                                         |                                                                                                  |
|---------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Celerity                                                | Speed                                                                                            |
| Egyptian bondage                                        | An allusion to the period of enslavement in the Old Testament of the Israelites by the Egyptians |
| Whose service is perfect freedom as liberation from sin | An allusion to a Christian prayer which describes service to God                                 |

---

## 2.8 QUESTIONS

---

- Q 1. Examine the nature of the revolution in women's education proposed by Wollstonecraft.
- Q 2. Use 'An Introduction' to demonstrate how Wollstonecraft's work is constrained by being the product of its day and age.

---

## 2.9 SUGGESTED READING

---

Warnock, Mary : Introduction to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and The Subjection of Women*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons., 1985.

---

## UNIT 3 VIRGINIA WOOLF: *A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN*

---

### Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Social And Cultural Background
  - 3.2.1 Of The Text
  - 3.2.2 Position Of Women
- 3.3 The Text
  - 3.3.1 Its Constituency
  - 3.3.2 Its Content
- 3.4 Its Contribution
  - 3.4.1 In Its Time
  - 3.4.2 Subsequently
- 3.5 Possible Application
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 Glossary
- 3.8 Questions
- 3.9 Suggested Reading

---

### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

---

The primary objective of this unit is to examine Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Chapter IV so as to extend the debate on the education of women begun in the analysis of Wollstonecraft and to introduce into it the fresh issue of the development of the woman writer. I also look at the related idea of economic independence for women.

---

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

---

Virginia Woolf was born in 1882 to Leslie Stephen — one of the editors of the Dictionary of National Biography — and his wife Julia, one of the best-known society hostesses in late nineteenth-century London. Woolf's own recollections of her childhood focus largely on repression and abuse. Her adulthood was spent largely among friends of the Bloomsbury group which was London's select coterie of intellectuals comprising painters, writers and critics. The group included people as diverse as the economist John Maynard Keynes, the iconoclastic biographer Lytton Strachey and the novelist E. M. Forster. Contemporaries were struck — unlike perhaps readers in the 1980's and 1990's with the sense of continuity rather than discontinuity such a background shared with the age that had gone before it. However radical Woolf has seemed to later readers, what struck her peers was that she was very like the age she criticised. 'The weapons they [Strachey and Woolf] turned on the Victorians were forged in Victorian houses' (Majumdar 239). I'll try and examine the consequences of this later but just for now I'd like to stay with Woolf's career. She helped shape Modernism in England both as a critic and as a novelist. One of her best known essays 'Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown' (1924) had her doing a hatchet-job on the well-made, realistic novel (such as those by Arnold Bennett, H. G. Wells and John Galsworthy). Her best known novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, is

---

## UNIT 3 VIRGINIA WOOLF: *A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN*

---

### Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Social And Cultural Background
  - 3.2.1 Of The Text
  - 3.2.2 Position Of Women
- 3.3 The Text
  - 3.3.1 Its Constituency
  - 3.3.2 Its Content
- 3.4 Its Contribution
  - 3.4.1 In Its Time
  - 3.4.2 Subsequently
- 3.5 Possible Application
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 Glossary
- 3.8 Questions
- 3.9 Suggested Reading

---

### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

---

The primary objective of this unit is to examine Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Chapter IV so as to extend the debate on the education of women begun in the analysis of Wollstonecraft and to introduce into it the fresh issue of the development of the woman writer. I also look at the related idea of economic independence for women.

---

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

---

Virginia Woolf was born in 1882 to Leslie Stephen — one of the editors of the Dictionary of National Biography — and his wife Julia, one of the best-known society hostesses in late nineteenth-century London. Woolf's own recollections of her childhood focus largely on repression and abuse. Her adulthood was spent largely among friends of the Bloomsbury group which was London's select coterie of intellectuals comprising painters, writers and critics. The group included people as diverse as the economist John Maynard Keynes, the iconoclastic biographer Lytton Strachey and the novelist E. M. Forster. Contemporaries were struck — unlike perhaps readers in the 1980's and 1990's with the sense of continuity rather than discontinuity such a background shared with the age that had gone before it. However radical Woolf has seemed to later readers, what struck her peers was that she was very like the age she criticised. 'The weapons they [Strachey and Woolf] turned on the Victorians were forged in Victorian houses' (Majumdar 239). I'll try and examine the consequences of this later but just for now I'd like to stay with Woolf's career. She helped shape Modernism in England both as a critic and as a novelist. One of her best known essays 'Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown' (1924) had her doing a hatchet-job on the well-made, realistic novel (such as those by Arnold Bennett, H. G. Wells and John Galsworthy). Her best known novels, *Mrs. Dalloway*

(1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931) — exemplify her use of the stream-of-consciousness technique, a hallmark of Modernism that describes external reality only when it bears on the interior psychological monologue of the protagonist. Along with her husband Leonard, Woolf began the Hogarth Press, an experimental venture in publishing in 1917. In 1941, after a lifetime of mental disturbance she took her own life. Erica Jong, a later feminist theorist, was to despair of the 'head in the oven' group of women writers which would (over the century) come to include Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton who also committed suicide. Is this a variant on the aesthetic of suffering or is Woolf's commitment more complicated than that? To understand her contribution I think it's necessary to know something of her world.

---

## 3.2 SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

---

### 3.2.1 Of the Age

The world of Woolf in a sense is light years away from Wollstonecraft. **Politically** the 130-odd years saw the rise of the British empire overseas, its peak during the Victorian age and the long twilight of its decline during which Woolf was to write. The obvious crashing of public confidence that accompanied the crash of this patriarchal structure went together with the growing tendency of Britain to become progressively isolationist during this period. Domestically Britain came to know of problems such as rural dislocation, urban unemployment that came in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, and the rise of Trade Unionism. By 1929 (when *A Room of One's Own* was published) she had experienced two terms of government by the Labour Party. **Socially** the mobility of the population was significantly more than it had been in Wollstonecraft's time, a mobility that had increased with the First World War. At the same time the war and the subsequent demobilisation resulted in unprecedented social and psychological dislocation. **Culturally** the arts had been transformed out of recognition by the increase in literacy and the rise of the novel. The role of women novelists is something I'll look at in 3.2.2 but just for now consider what it must have meant to have a reading public numerically larger and culturally more diversified — with far more women and young people in it than Wollstonecraft ever had.

This is a slight outline of some of the paradigm-shifts that took place between our previous theorist and Woolf. There's just one question I'd like to raise here. How much of the vitality of the changes — directly or indirectly — filters through Woolf's text to you? I don't like to prejudge the issue so I shan't offer my answer just now. But I will ask you to ask yourself this question, keeping the vexed issue of women's revolutions as discussed in 1.1. I will go on now to focus specifically on 'the women's question' as it was dismissively called in the time of Woolf but keep this problem of revolution in mind as you think about the way in which — if at all — this text mediates cultural change, or if it seems to be insulated from such change. In either case what do *you* think the implications would be?

### 3.2.2 Position of Women

The major *political* change in the position of women came about with the Suffragette movement which campaigned steadily (in the first two decades of the twentieth century) for women to be given the right to vote. **Professionally** more career options had opened for women in the second half of the nineteenth century. School-teaching, nursing and typing meant that far more women entered the workforce than ever before. By the turn of the century, college-teaching became another option as

did research. Beatrice Webb the economist, Mary Kingsley the explorer, Jane Harrison the anthropologist may seem symptomatic only of a tokenist representation of women today. In their time though they were not just pioneers in their fields but as women who wrote up their research. So a new kind of woman-writer had entered the field as a new kind of ancestor. The issue of ancestors [see 1.3.2] thus takes on a new dimension. Most of all the woman *novelists* had come into their own. The novel as popular form developed through the late eighteenth and nineteenth century as the form which was primarily about domestic space, the middle class, and above all, democratic. It did not necessarily require a classical education to either read or write. When Wollstonecraft wrote, the novel was in its infancy so that her reach of reference was necessarily limited. I'm sure you remember her reliance on *Clarissa* for purposes of illustration. In contrast Woolf has (as 3.3.2 will show) a range of 'great' women writers: Jane Austen, Charlotte and Emily Bronte and George Eliot whom she can cite. Not only do they serve as ancestors (should she want them to fill this role) they also provide her with an amazingly rich data-field on the basis of which she can if she wishes construct her thesis. Try to keep the potential breadth and challenge of this data-field in mind when you set her work alongside Wollstonecraft's which by definition has a much narrower frame of reference. Again, try to work out what the possible consequences might be when thinking about the work of both theorists. Finally the world of women's *education* had been transformed. The 1870's had seen the establishment of public schools for girls and the great women's colleges in London, Oxford and Cambridge. Wollstonecraft's plan that women be given an education where 'the cultivation of understanding' was placed above 'the acquirement of some corporeal accomplishment', had in that sense been given a concrete shape. It was this sort of a college audience that Woolf was to have for the two talks that were published as *A Room of One's Own*. And it is about this audience that I will now try to speak.

---

### 3.3 THE TEXT

---

#### 3.3.1 Its Constituency

The essay now known as *A Room of One's Own*, began as a two-part lecture series Woolf was invited to deliver at two colleges in Cambridge — Newnham and Girton — which at that time were both single-sex colleges that admitted only women. Girton has since become educational. The lectures were presented before the Arts Society at Newnham and the ODTAA ('One Damned Thing After Another') at Girton. Both were undergraduate societies; indeed they were relaxed and informal as the name of the second society shows. The audience then would have been largely student-standard. And all the students (reading for their B.A. degree) were young women. As women's colleges Newnham and Girton were (then as now) relatively under-funded, when compared to the men's colleges of the time. The students who attended Woolf's lectures would have come largely from what today are called 'bed-sits': single rooms which include a bed, a writing-desk and chairs and are intended therefore to double as sitting-room and bedroom. In contrast the men's colleges at that time would have been able to provide their students with 'sets' of two rooms per person. I mention these details because Woolf builds on them — explicitly and implicitly — in developing her argument that to write a woman needs financial independence and a room of her own and that in these two matters (economic security and privacy) women have been traditionally disadvantaged compared to men. If this was more or less the nature and composition of Woolf's original *audience*, what was *her* position likely to have been? By this time Woolf had established herself as both a novelist and a critic of note. Her theory and practice seemed alike to set the agenda for modernism at least in England and the coterie to which she belonged — the Bloomsbury group — was viewed as being at the cutting-

edge of intellectual discussion. Yet Woolf herself — although she addressed a university audience — remained acutely conscious all her life that she had not gone up to university. Her education had been largely self-acquired as she read on her own in her father's library. Her father had been a Cambridge don and her brother Thoby had gone up to Cambridge in his turn. Woolf herself tended to see this as a deprivation imposed upon her by patriarchy. And yet — as the very presence of her lecture-audience demonstrates — there were women who were free to enjoy the intellectual freedom and development of university life.

What are the factors in this relationship between a theorist and her audience? *First* there is a sense of shared space and concerns. Both speaker and audience are 'women together' so to speak. Both come from the same ethnic group, both are from within pretty much the same class within England: educated upper middle-class since the Cambridge of 1928 had not too much government funding for students outside this class to come to university. *Next* a slight skew may be detected in this relationship. Speaker and audience are likely to look at one point quite differently, that of a university education, since one side is experiencing it and the other side is conscious of having been deprived of it. *Then* consider the fact that once *A Room of One's Own* was published, the constituency by definition underwent a change. The reading public did not necessarily share any of these experiences with the theorists. Many of Woolf's reviewers were men (gender-bias will be considered in 3.4). Many women and men readers were (unlike the speaker and the first audience) professionals. *Finally* try to work out the implications of this audience-speaker relationship and position yourself vis-à-vis the text when you read it. Continuity of race will not obtain (3.5 will try to 'read' the Indian poem against Woolf to see if and how this matters). Continuities of class and gender may or may not obtain. Nonetheless Woolf's data-field is drawn from the discipline in which you and I are involved: that of literatures in English. What exactly constitutes Woolf's data and what is the hypothesis she constructs using this data?

### 3.3.2 Its Content

Having been invited to deliver a lecture on 'Women and Fiction' Woolf's hypothesis runs as follows: '...a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.' In other words, economic independence (which she places later at five hundred pounds a year) and domestic space (privacy within the home and stretches of freedom from cares associated with it) are according to Woolf, prerequisites for women to write. She has just constructed an imaginary picture of Shakespeare's sister — as talented as the dramatist — having to kill herself because gender-bias in Elizabethan England prevented her from exploiting her talent and instead exploited her vulnerability as a woman. In contrast she says Shakespeare's own mind could develop freely to being 'incandescent [and] unimpeded.' This is the state to which Woolf refers at the start of Chapter IV, which is the prescribed unit. She begins by inverting a patriarchal argument which she has cited earlier in which an old male professor tells a woman that no woman could have written the plays of Shakespeare since these are the product of a masculine mind which is superior. Naturally, says Woolf, no woman contemporary of Shakespeare's could have written like him. The Elizabethan age was patriarchal enough to restrict women entirely to the domestic sphere. This in turn conjures up a world of high mortality (including probably deaths in childbirth) and low social mobility for women. I will try to say a little about the women whom Woolf cites (in chronological order) and suggest their significance to the argument.

*Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea (1660-1720)* was an eighteenth-century nature poet, derided by Augustans such as Pope and Gray for composing poetry that was the foolish indulgence (according to them) of a would-be intellectual woman. Her poetry is seen today as representative of the late eighteenth-century age of sentiment which

explores nature through the feelings and imagination of a solitary individual. The significance of Anne Finch's poetry (in terms of literary history) is that she is the only woman poet to have been retrieved and placed in the phase of pre-romantic poetry, normally thought to have been a wholly male domain. In 1928 her poems were edited by Middleton Murry and this was also the year in which Woolf gave these lectures.

*Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle* and the contemporary of Anne Finch continues to be cited today (alongside more bureaucratic sources such as the UN report on women) as one who wrote on the inequitable division of labour between women and men which even now stands internationally as 2:1. Citing the same extract that Woolf dies in her piece, Naomi Wolf writes in *The Beauty Myth*: 'women work harder than men whether they are Eastern or Western, housewives or jobholders. A Pakistani woman spends sixty-three hours a week on domestic work alone, while a Western housewife, despite her modern appliances works just six hours less' (Wolf, 23).

*Dorothy Osborne* an eighteenth century correspondent of William Temple (the patron of Jonathan Swift) is used by Woolf as an instance of how a woman with the instincts of a writer as her letters show) is so conditioned by the hostility of a patriarchal society that judges women writers to be either dangerously or ludicrously insane that she decides consciously not to write for publication.

*Aphra Behn* (1640-1689) the woman dramatist is cited by Woolf as the first woman writer to turn professional, or in other words, to make money by her writing. As one from the lower-middle class (unlike the others cited above) Aphra Behn alters the paradigm of the woman writer. Today her play *Oroonoko* (about a noble black slave in London) is studied as a document to understand the eighteenth century's exploitation of the slave trade.

*Jane Austen* (1775-1817), *Charlotte Bronte* (1816-1854), *Emily Bronte* (1818-1848) and *George Eliot* (1819-1889) as famous novelists do not require Woolf's theory to rescue them from obscurity, unlike the others mentioned above. Woolf extends her argument to ask why women tend to write novels rather than poetic drama (as Emily Bronte might have done) or historical biography (as George Eliot might have done).

Woolf's own answer to this question is that as middle-class women in a patriarchy that restricted their freedom of movement, the social mobility and area of influence of women was restricted to that of personal relationships. This is also the area of operation of the novel (say, as against the epic which is usually meant to have a cosmic sweep). So in that sense gender dictates genre. Woolf goes on (using Austen as an instance) to make this point in another way. Middle-class women fear the opinion of others (even in their family circle) and can write only in snatches since they have no room of their own where they can write in their own time and space.

Woolf also points out that a woman writer lives under constant pressure from what later theorists would call *gender and ideology* (see 1.2. and 1.2.2). This constant strain pushes women writers, and frequently their novels and characters as well, to the point of insanity. She quotes from *Jane Eyre* to strengthen her case and show how the psychological strain of the author finds an echo in her protagonist and a submerged plot of insanity. Woolf concludes that the output of a woman writer is inherently different to that of a man even on the level of sentence-construction (see 1.1). The education of women therefore should be correspondingly different to that of men.

### 3.4 ITS CONTRIBUTION

#### 3.4.1. In its Time

When it was published *A Room of One's Own* attracted criticism on *three* counts. The *first* was put most forcefully by one of Woolf's chief antagonists, the novelist Arnold Bennet. Taking issue with her hypothesis he writes: 'Dostoevsky wrote some of the greatest novels in the world while he was continually distracted by terribly extra-artistic anxieties .... I have myself written long and formidable novels in bedrooms whose doors certainly had no locks (i.e., in cheap lodgings) and in the full dreadful knowledge that I had not five hundred a year of my own – nor fifty" (Majumdar 259). Ignoring the personal pleading in this critique, I think there is a valid point made here: economic independence is not essential for a writer. D.H. Lawrence is always cited as an example of an economically disadvantaged novelist who yet became successful. At the same time if I read the implications of Woolf's argument correctly, it seems to me she asks for economic independence **NOT** as an end in itself **BUT** as a means to an end. **WITH** it a woman has at least one weapon with which to fight patriarchy. **WITHOUT** it patriarchy has yet another weapon with which it can enforce its dictum that a woman must not write. *Next* there is the more serious complaint against Woolf's class-snobbery (associated with Bloomsbury) that is based on her valuing an Oxbridge education above any other. As Frank Swinnerton says 'It is the view of Virginia Woolf ... that no literary work done by any but highly educated persons of [her] own kind of culture can or should be interesting' (Majumdar 358). I think this may well be true of Woolf's relationship to her first audience [see 3.3.1] where she deliberately creates a sense of friendly oneness based on available commonalities of race, class and gender. Yet I don't think this limits her data or the thesis she constructs with its help. If anything she is more enthusiastic about the lower-middle-class Aphra Behn than she is about the titled writers with whom she begins because Behn pioneers professionalism. *Then* there is Herbert J. Muller's charge that Woolf's commitment to literature and feminism is not radical but trivial: 'Mrs. Woolf now has a room of her own. But what does she do in it? .... Her room might well be the drawing-room of a parsonage, and she serving tea to the ladies of the parish' (Majumdar 366). I rather think this is true of the use to which Woolf puts her own independence: one of her heroines is a society hostess, another is a wife and mother. Both these are gendered stereotypes that cater to what patriarchy wants and not to what radical feminism wants. Nonetheless the liberation Woolf wins for subsequent writers from gender-conditioning is to my mind more important than the use to which she puts this liberation in her own case.

*Finally* there is a criticism of Woolf's work which I think may be valuable. It comes from within her own constituency — educated women concerned with English studies — and it attacks a crucial part of her hypothesis: that somehow the environment women need for their development is inherently different to that needed for men. This is what Queenie Leavis says: '...Mrs. Woolf wants the women of her class to have the privileges of womanhood without the duties of responsibilities traditionally assumed by them, and to have the advantages of a man's education without being subsequently obliged, as nearly all men are, to justify it' (Majumdar 415). I think there is a certain validity to this in that at no point does Woolf talk of the social role and responsibilities of a writer who is guaranteed her economic independence and domestic privacy. Nor — for all her appreciation of Behn — does she seriously let professionalism enter the future she contemplates for women. Professional competition — women competing for posts as reporters, reviewers and reseachers — would have, I think, given Woolf's theory a personal maturity and social relevance it seems to me to lack. It might also have added a seriousness to her claim for equal opportunities for women.

### 3.4.2 Subsequently

How do *you* feel about Woolf's theory seventy years down the road? My feelings are mixed. I think that — with the advantage of distance — it's possible to take the long view and recover elements of value in it to which her contemporaries were unsympathetic. I enjoy her rescue and rehabilitation of women writers Anne Finch and Aphra Behn who have therefore been included in the canon and syllabi (hitherto constructs of patriarchy). *First* by moving these writers out of obscurity Woolf's theory makes them central to a study of an age (Behn and the eighteenth century) and to a movement (Finch and Romanticism). *Secondly* her focus on non-'literary' kinds of writing — diaries, letters and journals — also means that more women writers are likely to be read as these have been traditionally the genres which they used. *Next* Woolf's focus on the mental stress borne by women — as writers and subjects — has helped later theorists study such stress-patterns in fiction as a means to understand the repression of women by certain societies. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar build on this theory in their 1979 feminist study *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*. They revised literary history — in this case, that of the Victorian age — by showing how women writers react under pressure from patriarchy: '...[they] have frequently responded to sociocultural constraints by creating symbolic narratives that express their common feelings of constriction, exclusion, dispossession. In these narratives madwomen like Bertha Mason Rochester function as doubles through whom sane ladies like Jane Eyre (and Charlotte Brontë) can act out fantastic dreams of escape ....' (Showalter, 35). I value Woolf's work therefore because it holds the door open to such later theories about women's writing.

My reservation about *A Room of One's Own* relates to its applicability to South Asian cultures such as that of India. The notion of a separate space for women, whether guaranteed by *purdah* or a private sitting-room has been a commonplace for centuries. Has this guarantee of apartness been enabling or enfeebling for women who write? Look again at 'An Introduction' and try to work out your answer.

---

## 3.5 POSSIBLE APPLICATION

---

Look at the concluding lines of the poem which specifically discuss this question of identity. On the one hand, it is true that this writing builds on the idea that — regardless of race or social and economic position — women constitute a class cutting across time and space: '...I have no joys which are not yours, no / Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.' This is the central point of Woolf's work though in her case she makes her constituency [see 3.3.1] her world. Do you think this conclusion which speaks *of* and *for* all women speaks *to* both women and men on the same terms? Or has the idea of separatism for women been developed to a point where such a connection can no longer be valid? If so, down what road(s) do *you* think feminist theories must go next?

---

## 3.6 LET US SUM UP

---

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was a novelist and theorist based in Edwardian London at a time of historic change. *Politically* Britain's empire declined steadily between the two world wars. Women got the right to vote and became more *socially* mobile as they entered the universities and the professions. *A Room of One's Own* argues

that women writers should be enabled by a guarantee of economic independence and privacy. Contemporaries found her theory insufficiently radical in terms of the class-struggle and the women's movement. Later theorists though have been able to apply and extend her work by reconstructing the canon and rewriting literary history. The applicability of Woolf's theory across cultures however may be worth examining.

---

### 3.7 GLOSSARY

---

|           |                |
|-----------|----------------|
| Radical   | revolutionary  |
| Vis-à-vis | in relation to |

---

### 3.8 QUESTIONS

---

- Q 1 Examine Woolf's data with regard to the canon *or* to ancestors in women's writing.
- Q 2 Analyse the **strengths and** limitations of Woolf's theory with reference to class *or* gender.
- Q3 Test the applicability of Woolf's theory across cultures with the help of 'An Introduction.'

---

### 3.9 SUGGESTED READING

---

- Majumdar, Robin & Allen McLaurin. *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge, 1975.
- Rose, Phyllis. *Woman of Letters: A Life of Virginia Woolf*. London: Routledge, 1978.
- Rosenthal, Michael. *Virginia Woolf*. London: Routledge, 1979.

---

## UNIT 4 SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR: *THE SECOND SEX*

---

### Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Social And Cultural Background
  - 4.2.1 The Age
  - 4.2.2 Position Of Women
- 4.3 The Text
  - 4.3.1 Its Constituency
  - 4.3.3 Its Content
- 4.4 Its Contribution
  - 4.4.1 In Its Time
  - 4.4.2 Subsequently
- 4.5 Possible Application
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Glossary
- 4.8 Questions
- 4.9 Suggested Reading

---

### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

---

The objective of this unit is to analyse Simone de Beauvoir's introduction to *The Second Sex* so as to broaden the discussion on the independence of women. In the preceding unit on Woolf, the independence examined was chiefly economic. I think de Beauvoir's more general evocation of conditions for personal *and* professional happiness supplement Woolf's account. This is particularly so because the next unit will again narrow the focus to deal largely with the professional woman writer.

---

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

---

As lifelong companion to the French existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir's (born 1908) work is often discussed as if it was merely an extension of Sartre's concerns with the conditions of human choice and freedom. More recently an attempt has been made to see de Beauvoir's work as it communicated itself to the postwar era and also something of its enduring quality as it seems to ask questions which aren't quite answered even today. *The Second Sex* has been described by H. M. Parshley who first translated it from French to English as 'a book on woman and her historical and contemporary situation in Western culture, which is scientifically accurate in matters of biology, comprehensive and frank in its treatment of woman's individual development and social relations, illuminated throughout by a wealth of literary and scientific citation and founded upon a broadly generous and consistent philosophy' (Parshley 7). How — if at all — does *The Second Sex* become such an achievement and what are the consequences of its so doing?

---

## UNIT 4 SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR: *THE SECOND SEX*

---

### Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Social And Cultural Background
  - 4.2.1 The Age
  - 4.2.2 Position Of Women
- 4.3 The Text
  - 4.3.1 Its Constituency
  - 4.3.3 Its Content
- 4.4 Its Contribution
  - 4.4.1 In Its Time
  - 4.4.2 Subsequently
- 4.5 Possible Application
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Glossary
- 4.8 Questions
- 4.9 Suggested Reading

---

### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

---

The objective of this unit is to analyse Simone de Beauvoir's introduction to *The Second Sex* so as to broaden the discussion on the independence of women. In the preceding unit on Woolf, the independence examined was chiefly economic. I think de Beauvoir's more general evocation of conditions for personal *and* professional happiness supplement Woolf's account. This is particularly so because the next unit will again narrow the focus to deal largely with the professional woman writer.

---

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

---

As lifelong companion to the French existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir's (born 1908) work is often discussed as if it was merely an extension of Sartre's concerns with the conditions of human choice and freedom. More recently an attempt has been made to see de Beauvoir's work as it communicated itself to the postwar era and also something of its enduring quality as it seems to ask questions which aren't quite answered even today. *The Second Sex* has been described by H. M. Parshley who first translated it from French to English as 'a book on woman and her historical and contemporary situation in Western culture, which is scientifically accurate in matters of biology, comprehensive and frank in its treatment of woman's individual development and social relations, illuminated throughout by a wealth of literary and scientific citation and founded upon a broadly generous and consistent philosophy' (Parshley 7). How — if at all — does *The Second Sex* become such an achievement and what are the consequences of its so doing?

## 4.2 SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

### 4.2.1 The Age

Written in 1949, four years after the end of the Second World War (1939-1945), *The Second Sex* expresses the concerns of its age. Like its forerunner World War II had seen a victory for the Allies (Britain, France and their colonies and the then U.S.S.R) largely on account of the entry of the United States. As a result the period after the war is marked by an unsurprising decline in eurocentrism, given that politically and economically Europe — specifically Britain, France and Germany — were significantly weakened. Along with this goes the dismantling of Empire. The war-effort had revealed to the colonies their own strength in nationalism and the relative weakening of the colonisers. Pragmatically the three colonisers mentioned above also found it more economical to gradually dismantle their colonies rather than retain them. The Introduction speaks of the predicament of the colonised and their sense of marginalisation, when they are compared to groups such as women who have been oppressed down the ages. The sense of inwardness with the predicament of the colonised, or for that matter with the Jews — the race targetted for destruction by Nazi Germany during the Second World War — is intensely characteristic of postwar Europe which was ready for the first time to make connections between one form of oppression and another on account of the way in which war had foregrounded various forms of oppression.

The decline in a belief in eurocentric might is accompanied by a decline of faith in eurocentric thought as well. The Introduction begins the enterprise of dismantling eurocentric schools of philosophy, such as that of the founding fathers of the Church in Europe. There was in any case a sense of the inadequacy of European thought which had precipitated rather than prevented war. Beauvoir dismantles this philosophy not only because it is eurocentric but because it is androcentric or male-centred.

### 4.2.2 Position of Women

World War II confirmed the trend set by the First World War in terms of the pattern of employment for women. Again women entered the workforce at all levels to boost economic production. At the same time, two kinds of women continued to be unusual: professionals and businesswomen. They were the only two categories of women who were empowered to choose their happiness and destiny, because they had both an income and the training to manage their money and their lives. 'It is only the highly trained professional woman and the highly placed woman in business — both genuine existents with a profound and permanent interest in their work and projects — who can attain under present circumstances the position of independence and equality envisaged by Mlle de Beauvoir, as the one firm basis for ideal human relations between men and women' (Parshley 11). I will suggest what I believe to be the consequences of a constituency limited in this way in 4.3.1 but just now I'd like to draw your attention to the way in which the position of women at this time compares to that in the time of Woolf [see 3.2.2]. Access to higher education and the right to vote had by this time empowered at least two generations of women. Nonetheless there still seems to be little sense between women and men of a level playing-field in terms of the ability to choose one's life.

There is, however, one additional factor that had not come into its own at the time of which Woolf wrote. The Russian Revolution (1917) which had replaced hereditary Czarist rule with communist government through the soviets had by this time developed socialist feminism. The Soviet government had begun with various measures aimed at the emancipation of women.

collectivised childcare and centralised household services. By the time of de Beauvoir's book however, the Soviet state had been hit by both economic and political crises and had had to return to traditional family values since it could not continue to fund women's welfare schemes. Even so Beauvoir writes — unlike Wollstonecraft and Woolf — at a time when the socialist feminist ethic is in position and thus is — at least theoretically — an alternative to feminism developing in the capitalist West.

---

## 4.3 THE TEXT

---

### 4.3.1 Its Constituency

*The Second Sex* is I think, addressed very specifically to women and men who inherit — *directly* through ethnicity or *indirectly* through their education a Western European tradition of thought that is primarily anti-feminist. The sources of this tradition vary. *Hellenism* is represented by Plato and Aristotle. *Christianity* is represented by the Church Fathers, specifically, Thomas Aquinas and Augustine. As suggested in 4.2.1 *The Second Sex* addresses this constituency at a moment of vulnerability when its great tradition has been shown by World War I to be fallible and fragile. In a sense its constituency is at least one generation down the road in terms of the development of feminism since that of Virginia Woolf. For now not only are women empowered with an education and the vote, they also go out to work. Women divide their time now between family and career. In one sense therefore the early battle for gainful employment outside the home — one of the issues before Wollstonecraft and Woolf — is now over. This is however a mixed blessing. For *one*, as the translator points out the new vocation has brought its own problems in its wake, such as competition between single working women and employed homemakers, each of whom may long occasionally for the life of the other.

...the vast majority of unmarried [women] workers entertain the hope — often enough illusive — that marriage will release them from work in which they have no interest and which they regard as a temporary burden, the married ones gain no real independence through work done only to supplement the perhaps temporarily inadequate earnings of their 'providers.'  
(Parshley, 11)

The goal of meaningful employment then — one of the major goals of British feminist theorists hitherto — is now seen to be problematic. It seems to have increased the work of women and not to have increased women's power, which is the opposite of what it was supposed to do. Paid employment outside the home has to be carried on along with unpaid employment within the home. It has become a source of added pressure rather than of liberation. For *another* as Beauvoir points out, the success of the women's movement in the past has meant that radicalism seems unnecessary to women in time present. 'Many of today's women, fortunate in the restoration of all the privileges pertaining to the state of the human being, can afford the luxury of impartiality — we even recognise its necessity. We are no longer like our partisan elders; by and large, we have won the game' [Beauvoir, 27]. Since Wollstonecraft's time the women's movement had made specific gains. It has secured the right to vote, access to education, specialised employment, and management of income. These victories might induce complacency, she feels. Indeed she views it as a threat. *The Second Sex* may be seen I think as a means of combating this threat. It is in this sense a call to arms.

The thesis that undergirds *The Second Sex* is set out in the introduction and is concerned with the definition of a woman's identity. Beauvoir believes it is formulated by European tradition.

...humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being .... [woman] is simply what man decrees: thus she is called 'the sex' by which is meant that she appeals essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex — absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is ... the Absolute — she is the Other. (Beauvoir, 16)

What can possibly be deduced from such a formulation? *First*, that alterity — this state of otherness — posits the superiority of the norm and the inferiority of all departures from the norm. In this case, man is seen as the norm and woman as the departure or aberration. *Next* alterity breeds inequality. Woman is defined in relation to man, never the other way about. *Then*, alterity breeds hostility. When positioned against each other like this men and women are bound to see each other largely in an oppositional or adversarial relationship. *Finally* a woman's role is conditioned entirely by the biological fact of sex. Woman is seen only as a sexual entity. This is a perspective that is both demeaning and limiting.

According to Beauvoir this myth of 'Woman as Other' permeates European thought. She explains that women have always occupied a position unique among the oppressed sections of humankind. Unlike all other such categories women are numerically equal to their oppressors, men. Unlike those persecuted on grounds of race (African-Americans or Jews) women do not have a shared history. Unlike those oppressed on grounds of class (the proletariat) women have always existed. The subordination of women is not the result of a particular historical event. As a result their lack of organisation as a homogeneous group women have been unable to demolish the myth of 'Woman as Other' which has crippled them down the ages. The women's movement has been hamstrung for this reason.

[Women] have gained only what men have been willing to grant; they have taken nothing, they have only received.

The reason for this is that women lack concrete means for this is that women lack concrete means for organising themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with the correlative unit. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own; and they have no such solidarity of work and interest as that of the proletariat. They are not even promiscuously herded together in the way that creates community feeling among the American Negroes, the ghetto Jews.... Women cannot ever dream of exterminating the males. The bond that unites her to her oppressors is not comparable to any other .... Male and female stand opposed within a primordial *Mitsein* and woman has not broken it. (Beauvoir, 19)

What points may be said to follow from Beauvoir's thesis? *First* that the relation between women and their oppressors, men, is the only form of bondage that has its origin in a biological fact rather than in a historical process. *Next* that women have not been able to create a gender-based bonding among themselves that can surmount ethnic or class origins. *Consequently* the women's movement has always subsisted on the charity of men. Women have acquiesced in their second-class status and have not challenged it.

---

## 4.4 ITS CONTRIBUTION

---

### 4.4.1 Immediately

Beauvoir's work has been seen to borrow its immediate starting-point from existentialist thought, specifically from Sartre. This is clear from her definition of women and men as essentially free agents. Both strive for freedom and happiness, each unit sees the other as a threat in this search and each tries to subdue the other. Women unlike men are compelled by biological necessity to accept subordination. At the same time there is an anomaly inherent in Sartre's theory which becomes part of Beauvoir's as well.

....Beauvoir skates over the inherent difficulty in the Sartreian existentialist project for a common freedom. Since the free subject defines himself as free over and against the other, the *mitsein* with the other requires their mutual opposition to a third. This is no true unity but a temporary alliance of some against the freedom of others. (Charvet, 101)

### 4.4.2 Subsequently

How does *The Second Sex* look almost fifty years down the road from its first publication? *First* it seems in one sense to be rather far from the radical feminism that developed in the nineteen sixties and seventies which rejected the shaping of women's destiny by her sexual nature. Beauvoir [see 4.3.2] accepts that a woman's role was influenced by biological constraints. Later feminist theories move sharply away from this notion. *Next* [as 5.4.1 will show] Beauvoir's idea that women's movements lose their cutting-edge when they prioritise race or class loyalties over gender-loyalties has not always found acceptance. African-American women and increasingly women in Asia believe that their women's movements work precisely because they do so within a clear-cut ethnic context. *Finally* as more recent studies such as *The Beauty Myth* show, the enterprise of capitalism itself is hostile to women in some of its forms such as the beauty-industry. It may be too simplistic to say that woman's chief enemy is man.

---

## 4.5 POSSIBLE APPLICATION

---

I'd like to focus if I may on the way in which 'An Introduction' may be seen to selectively highlight some features of Beauvoir's thesis. On the *one* hand it is true that the poem examines the way in which biological necessity shapes woman's role. 'I was child, and later they /Told me I grew, for I became tall, as my limbs swelled and one or other places sprouted hair.' On the *other* I think Das is careful to establish the ethnic loyalties that shape her identity. Gender is clearly NOT its sole determinant: 'I am Indian, very brown, born in / Malabar, I speak three languages, write in /Two, dream on one.' Does this delineation of ethnic patterns make Das's position seem more or less radical to you ?

---

## 4.6 LET US SUM UP

---

*The Second Sex* posits the existence of the myth that 'Woman is Man's Other' in European thought. This myth, says Beauvoir, subordinates and alienates women. Women — alone of all the oppressed — are subordinated on biological rather than on

historical grounds. This is perpetuated by women's inability to mobilise gender-loyalties over and above distinctions of race and class. These last two points have been queried by more recent feminisms.

Simone De Beauvoir

---

## 4.7 GLOSSARY

---

|                         |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Bebel                   | August Bebel (1840-1913) a German socialist wrote <i>Woman under Socialism</i> (1879) which was a survey of the position of women from prehistoric times up to a projected socialist utopia. |
| <i>Mitsein</i> (German) | Pact or alliance                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Parker, Dorothy         | An American columnist of the 1940's                                                                                                                                                          |
| Trotskyite              | A follower of the Communist leader Leon Trotsky.                                                                                                                                             |

---

## 4.8 QUESTIONS

---

- Q 1 Analyse the components of Beauvoir's thesis to indicate (a) its strengths (b) its limitations.
- Q 2 Examine 'An Introduction' to bring out its radicalism with reference to (a) gender-based loyalties (b) ethnic loyalties.

---

## 4.9 SUGGESTED READING

---

|                        |                                                                                 |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Charvet, John          | <i>Feminism</i> . London: J.M. Dent, 1982.                                      |
| Goodman, Lizbeth (ed.) | <i>Literature &amp; Gender</i> . London: Routledge & The Open University, 1996. |

---

## UNIT 5 ELAINE SHOWALTER : 'FEMINIST CRITICISM IN THE WILDERNESS'

---

### Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Social And Cultural Background
  - 5.2.1 The Age
  - 5.2.2 Position of Women
- 5.3 The Text
  - 5.3.1 Its Constituency
  - 5.3.2 Its Content
- 5.4 Is Contribution
  - 5.4.1 In Its Time
  - 5.4.2 Subsequently
- 5.5 Possible Application
- 5.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.7 Glossary
- 5.8 Questions
- 5.9 Suggested Reading

---

### 5.0 OBJECTIVES

---

The *main* objective of this unit is to analyse Elaine Showalter's 1981 essay, 'Feminine Criticism in the Wilderness' with reference to the position of women teachers and critics vis-a-vis the academy. I also use this essay to suggest something of the dialogue between various kinds of theory, feminist and otherwise.

---

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

---

American theorist Elaine Showalter, born in 1941 studied at Bryn Mawr College, an Ivy League institution and the University of California. As teacher and researcher in English and Women's Studies she has been at various American universities, including Rutgers and Princeton. She has worked on literary history, having published *A Literature of Their Own: Women Writers from Bronte to Lessing* (1977) and on the relationship between women's literatures and the women's movement in the United States.

In a 1979 essay, Showalter hijacks a stuffy patriarchal description by Leon Edel of the archetypal American feminist theorist '... an auburn-haired young woman, obviously American, who wore ear-rings and carried an armful of folders and an attache case' (Showalter, 125). Showalter's wry response I think suggests — underneath the comedy — the difficulties of her position.

I suppose we should be grateful that at least one woman ... makes an appearance in this [imaginary] gathering, even if she is not invited to join the debate. I imagine that she is a feminist critic — in fact, if I could afford to take taxis to the British Museum [the site of this gathering] I would think they had perhaps seen me — and it is

---

## UNIT 5 ELAINE SHOWALTER : 'FEMINIST CRITICISM IN THE WILDERNESS'

---

### Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Social And Cultural Background
  - 5.2.1 The Age
  - 5.2.2 Position of Women
- 5.3 The Text
  - 5.3.1 Its Constituency
  - 5.3.2 Its Content
- 5.4 Is Contribution
  - 5.4.1 In Its Time
  - 5.4.2 Subsequently
- 5.5 Possible Application
- 5.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.7 Glossary
- 5.8 Questions
- 5.9 Suggested Reading

---

### 5.0 OBJECTIVES

---

The *main* objective of this unit is to analyse Elaine Showalter's 1981 essay, 'Feminine Criticism in the Wilderness' with reference to the position of women teachers and critics vis-a-vis the academy. I also use this essay to suggest something of the dialogue between various kinds of theory, feminist and otherwise.

---

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

---

American theorist Elaine Showalter, born in 1941 studied at Bryn Mawr College, an Ivy League institution and the University of California. As teacher and researcher in English and Women's Studies she has been at various American universities, including Rutgers and Princeton. She has worked on literary history, having published *A Literature of Their Own: Women Writers from Bronte to Lessing* (1977) and on the relationship between women's literatures and the women's movement in the United States.

In a 1979 essay, Showalter hijacks a stuffy patriarchal description by Leon Edel of the archetypal American feminist theorist '... an auburn-haired young woman, obviously American, who wore ear-rings and carried an armful of folders and an attache case' (Showalter, 125). Showalter's wry response I think suggests — underneath the comedy — the difficulties of her position.

I suppose we should be grateful that at least one woman ... makes an appearance in this [imaginary] gathering, even if she is not invited to join the debate. I imagine that she is a feminist critic — in fact, if I could afford to take taxis to the British Museum [the site of this gathering] I would think they had perhaps seen me — and it is

pleasing to think that while the men stand gossiping in the sun, she is inside hard at work. But these are scant satisfactions when we realise that of all the approaches to English studies current in the 1970's, feminist criticism is the most isolated and the least understood.

*First* there is the problem of the woman scholar trying to position herself in the academy which [see 1.2.2] is patriarchal in the assumptions it makes and the power-structures through which it deals. A woman-researcher can only seem a caricature to such an academy, a deviation from the norm or an absurd travesty. *Next* there is the way in which such a woman scholar creates space for herself. Showalter begins by inverting assumptions made by patriarchy. Patriarchy depends on the notion that what men do is important. Women either idle or gossip. Showalter stands this idea on its head. *Then* there is the problem of an American gatecrashing the academy which so far — even as the prescribed theorists suggest — has been dominated by Europeans so far. *Finally* there is the isolation that suggests how problematic it is for feminist theories to relate to any other critical school(s). Is this isolation enabling or disabling? It becomes increasingly problematic [see 1.4.2] as feminist theories develop.

I will return to this early essay — 'Towards a Feminist Poetics' — in 5.3.2 but just for now I'd like to make one quick point concerning Showalter. How far or how close do you think Showalter is from Woolf's original constituency? [See 3.3.1]. Perhaps a quick look at the context in which she writes will suggest an answer.

---

## 5.2 SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

---

### 5.2.1 The Age

With the end of the Second World War, international political and economic influence had shifted away from Britain — whose Empire [see 3.2.1] was declining. The new superpowers, the United States and the (then) Soviet Union were emerging. The period of the Cold War — the hostility between these two power blocs — followed. This period was punctuated by various crises such as the Berlin Blockade, the Cuban crisis, the Korean and Vietnam wars followed. During this time the American campus life tried to provide sites of alternative culture to the capitalism of the establishment. When the United States military intervened in Vietnam many American campuses became centres of the peace movement and were critical of the government. In 1968, the 'Paris Spring' or the young people's movement across Europe in favour of peace and liberation was echoed by similar movements in American campuses. The 1970's and 1980's saw an explosion in the field of critical theory in American campuses especially with reference to women's writing and to African-American literature. Outside the academy the Women's movement and the Black power movement had begun a long time before this. But within the academy, the theoretical bases of these movements were developed most extensively during the seventies and the eighties, in other words, during the time of a great deal of Showalter's work. This was also the time when the American academy consolidated its response to European challengers in the field of theory. What — if anything — is likely to have been the effect of these pressures on the women's movement and on the question of women's writing?

### 5.2.2 Position of Women

Within the academy — and this is primarily Showalter's context — this is a fraught issue. Feminist theories by this time have formulated three central questions around

which — by and large — the debate is structured. These are set out most clearly perhaps in Annette Kolodny's 1980 essay 'Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism.' I will list the propositions as Kolodny does, and then offer a quick gloss of my own.

1. *Literary history (and with that, the historicity of literature) is a fiction*
2. *Insofar as we are taught to read, what we engage are not texts but paradigms.*
3. *Since the grounds upon which we assign aesthetic value to texts are never infallible, unchangeable, or universal, we must reexamine not only our aesthetics but, as well, the inherent biases and assumptions informing the critical methods which (in part) shape our aesthetic responses.*

In other words, by the time Showalter's prescribed essay is written, the three points established in the American academy concerning feminist theories on which there is general agreement are respectively: feminist theories are about the reconstruction of the canon so as to reclaim a stronghold of patriarchy (see 1.3.1), the sensitising of readers to paradigms or theoretical models — concealed within texts — based on gender-conditioning (see 1.2.1), and the role of theory in changing the way in which readers (1.4.1) interpret texts. Moreover in terms of bread-and-butter positioning, Women's Studies had by this time become a recognised discipline at American universities. Conferences were being held, journals published, and syllabi framed on feminist theories. What could have been amiss?

---

## 5.3 THE TEXT

---

### 5.3.1 Its Constituency

'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,' it seems to me addresses women and men within the academy — who are anxious about a specific problem. Should feminist theories concern themselves with constructing a common methodology or should they not? The constituency then is a small specific one comprising literary theorists. Of course not all are feminists. Some are primarily Marxists who prioritise class over other factors when discussing the ways in which books are written. Others may be theorists either from amongst African-Americans or from the developing world who feel their cultural histories are excluded from theoretical work since hitherto this work has been carried out by Caucasian women from the developed world. All share an interest in theory of one kind or another. All are exercised by one central issue. Should feminist theories continue to remain open-ended and refuse to commit themselves to any *one* structural framework? The advantage of this *methodicide* or 'murder of method' is that it allows feminist theories to retain their *pluralism* or spirit of free interpretation which — theorists claim — is the characteristic strength of women's speech over men's. The disadvantage is that by remaining unstructured, feminist theories get marginalised or made unimportant by other, more organised schools of critical theory. The alternative to methodicide is *methodolatry* or worship of method. The constituency thus includes theorists whose preferences vary but can be grouped under either of these responses.

### 5.3.2 Its thesis and data

The thesis of this essay is one which Showalter formulates more discursively in the 1979 essay 'Toward a Feminist Poetics,' to which 5.1 alludes. Showalter argues that there are essentially *two* kinds of feminist theory. The *first* concerns itself with the *woman as reader* and may be called the *feminist critique*.

... like other kinds of critique is a historically grounded inquiry which probes the ideological assumptions of literary phenomena. Its subjects include 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. It is also concerned with the exploitation and manipulation of the female audience. (Showalter, 128)

The *second* concerns itself with the *woman as writer* and may be called *gynocritics*. It deals with

... woman as the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women. Its subjects include the psychodynamics of female creativity; linguistics and the problem of a female language; the trajectory of the individual or collective female literary career; literary history; and of course, studies of particular writers and works. (ibid.)

Comparing the two modes of theory Showalter writes

The feminist critique is essentially political and polemical, with theoretical affiliations to Marxist sociology and aesthetics; gynocritics is more self-contained and experimental with connections to other modes of new feminist research ....[We may] compare the feminist critique to the Old Testament, 'looking for the sins and errors of the past,' and gynocritics to the New Testament, seeking 'the grace of the imagination.' Both kinds are necessary ... for only the Jeremiahs of the feminist critique can lead us out of the 'Egypt of female servitude' to 'the promised land of the feminist vision' (ibid., 129)

Please see 5.7 for the relevant glosses, and let me suggest an example of these two kinds of writing. Suppose I write an essay 'Stereotypes of women in *Middlemarch*.' I might discuss Dorothea as a failed theorist, Rosamond as a dumb blonde and Mary Garth as a wise governess. I might go on to speak of them as being prisoners of both class and gender due to the constraints of Victorian society. The essay would be primarily a feminist critique that analysed cultural and aesthetic stereotypes in class-based terms borrowed probably from Marxist theory. Supposed instead my essay were to be titled 'The silencing of George Eliot in *Middlemarch*' I might look at the constraints placed on Eliot by patriarchy: her thwarted attempts to shape a sentence suitable to her needs and so on. I would probably need to rely on work done in biological and linguistic criticism. This essay would be closer to *gynocritics* which examines the characteristic of a distinctively woman's practice of writing, and would perhaps be called *gynocentric* (or woman-centred) as opposed to *androcentric* (or male-centred).

The data Showalter uses to support her theory of gynocritics is based on four models. **Organic or biological** criticism believes that biological differentiation is fundamental to understanding how women see themselves in relation to society and hence to understanding how they represent themselves in writing. Its strength is its reliance on personal experience, that verges on the confessional. Its weakness is that it promotes exclusionism based on biological difference. **Linguistic** criticism examines possible differences in the ways women and men use language, explores reasons for these differences. Its strength is the powerful emotional appeal of the notion of a women's language. Its weakness is that it does not examine whether women and men have equality of opportunity and access to a common language. Thus inadvertently it may perpetuate repression instead of obtaining freedom by examining it. **Psychoanalytical feminist** criticism is a model of difference based on

the relationship between gender and the creative process. It has a high degree of sensitivity when applied to specific texts, authors and groups of cultures. Its limitation as a theoretical model arises from its inability to explain social, economic or historical processes of change: Showalter therefore vests her faith in a model based on a theory of *women's culture*. Theories of biology, language and psyche inform such a theory of culture by suggesting a range of social contexts. Showalter borrows a diagrammatic representation from anthropology to explain the theory of women's culture. Women's culture and men's culture are represented by two intersecting circles with a large area of common experience and two slight crescent-shaped areas of experience. One of these is specific to women and the other is specific to men. Historically women have been the muted (or silenced) group and men the dominant group. Feminist theories (according to Showalter) need to articulate the area specific to women and put this at the centre of women's writing. The consequences promised are (a) a rewriting of cultural and literary history so as to include women, (b) a recreation of the canon and (c) an overhauling of literary classifications based on era and genre.

---

## 5.4 ITS CONTRIBUTION

---

### 5.4.1 Immediately

Showalter's earlier work had attracted criticism on account of its refusal to take African-American writing into account. Barbara Smith's 'Toward a Black Feminist Criticism' complains about Showalter's persistent ignoring of any non-white female writing. Smith begins by quoting Showalter's sole mention of such writing: 'Furthermore, there are other literary subcultures (African-American novelists, for example) whose history offers a precedent for feminist scholarship to use (Showalter, 172) and goes on to point out that such appropriation — even in the cause of feminist theory — is racist. 'The idea of critics like Showalter *using* Black literature is chilling, a case of barely disguised cultural imperialism'. In contrast 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness' tries to work toward cultural open-endedness in two ways. *First* she speaks of two cultures: women and men — as being muted and dominant respectively and thus deliberately avoids the concept of a subculture. In a sense *all* women — regardless of race and class comprised the marginalised culture and this common repression makes all women one, in Showalter's cultural model. *Secondly* Showalter emphasises that such a gynocentric cultural model must — if it is to work — be able to take into account all the forces — ethnic, academic or economic — so as to 'plot the precise cultural locus of female literary identity'. This gain in cultural sensitivity is, I think, the most apparent impact of Showalter's essay. It makes gynocritics seem to offer a model that can take on board cultural variables and say, it can have a receptivity to feminist theories in the developing world. Nonetheless [see 6.2] it is a claim contested by Indian feminist theorists who feel that gynocritics is too obviously limited by its inheritance of Western cultural imperialism.

### 5.4.2 Subsequently

How well has gynocritics worn ? Look at the following comment and see what you make of it

...there is a danger that a 'gynocriticism' that emphasises the pathology of women writers' interaction with a patriarchal canon (or even a maternal one) .... becomes a poetics of suffering and victimisation. We also need to ask ourselves whether there are other more positive ways in which women

writers may respond to an intimidating male tradition of misogynistic myths and monstrous women that threatens the creative fire in their heads? Is there hidden laughter as well as anger, a subversive spirit of feminine mischief able to parody or appropriate or reshape male stories, masculine modes and forms? (Morris, 73)

The *problem* with gynocriticism — as suggested here — is that it can see only one relationship between women's writing and men's writing: that which is adversarial or hostile. *Therefore* gynocriticism is restricted to offering a narrative of suffering in which women are seen always and only as victims. In the process gynocriticism loses the weapon it could have had to hijack the agenda of patriarchy: the weapon of laughter. Think back now to the one of Woolf's essay, from which the element of fun — a woman speaking *about* and *to* women in a primarily male academy — is never lost. Does Woolf gain or lose, do you think, by putting across theory with a sense of fun? And as a corollary, do you think Showalter's essay becomes more or less profound because it shuts out humour?

---

## 5.5 POSSIBLE APPLICATION

---

Keeping these pros and cons in mind, please turn yet again to 'An Introduction' and give it another read. At the centre of the poem is an experience that — biologically and psychologically — is a part of the 'wilderness.' In other words it is part of that crescent-shaped area peculiar to the silenced culture of women. 'When/ I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask? For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the /Bedroom, and closed the door He did not beat me/ But my sad woman-body felt so beaten./ The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I shrank/ Pitifully.' How much of this central experience can gynocriticism recover? The notion of woman as sufferer, perhaps can be restored to the articulate world. I should imagine though that a great deal of work on the interplay of ethnic, sexual and economic factors will need to be done, and I wonder how far gynocritics will offer a culturally-sensitive model. What do *you* think?

---

## 5.6 LET US SUM UP

---

'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness' is written at a time when the American campus — a site for alternative or fringe thinking — is increasingly concerned (to all appearances) with Women's Studies. The essay highlights the need for feminist theories to work out a framework they can share. Showalter suggests gynocritics — theories which are centred on the experience of women as writers — as a common factor. She explores biological, linguistic and psychoanalytical models of difference in women's writing and sets them aside in favour of a theory based on a model of women's culture. Arguing that women constitute the muted culture and men the dominant culture, Showalter reminds feminist theorists of the need to keep all cultural phenomena — race, class, the academy and the market in mind — to produce a 'thick' or multi-layered analysis of women's writing. This will enable feminist theorists to sensitively map the wilderness.

---

## 5.7 GLOSSARY

---

The Old Testament

The body of writings in the Bible about the cultural and spiritual development of Israel before the birth of Jesus. They were guided by a stern and punishing God, the Ten Commandments and the prophets.

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The wilderness    | The desert area in which the Israelites wandered when they were led by Moses from Egypt.                                                                                                                              |
| Egypt             | where they had been slaves to the Egyptians, to...                                                                                                                                                                    |
| The Promised Land | of Canaan which God gave them for their own country.                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Jeremiah          | A prophet who led Israel and warned them about the birth and ministry of Jesus and the development of the Church. It has a vision of a Loving, compassionate God who is there for all people not only the Israelites. |

The Old Testament is associated in this essay with the restrictive practice of the feminist critique. The New Testament is associated in this essay with the more liberating practice of gynocritics. The excitement of the wilderness is due to the excitement of the challenges and 'difference' of women's writing. It is preferred in this essay to the serenity of the Promised Land which is that of the unchallenged, stable canon.

---

## 5.8 QUESTIONS

---

- Q 1. Analyse the constituency of 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness' and suggest possible ways in which it might have shaped the essay.
- Q 2. Evaluate gynocriticism against any one other critical model (discussed by Showalter in this essay) using 'An Introduction' to make the comparison.

---

## 5.9 SUGGESTED READING

---

Showalter, Elaine (ed.) *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*. 1984, repr. London: Virago, 1985.

---

## UNIT 6 FEMINIST CONCERNS IN INDIA TODAY

---

### Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 Social and cultural background
  - 6.2.1 The Age
  - 6.2.2 Position of Women
- 6.3 The Text
  - 6.3.1 Its Constituency
  - 6.3.2 Its Content
- 6.4 Its Contribution
  - 6.4.1 Immediately
  - 6.4.2 Subsequently
- 6.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.6 Glossary
- 6.7 Questions
- 6.8 Suggested Reading

---

### 6.0 OBJECTIVES

---

The *primary* objective of this concluding unit is to explore some concerns of feminist theories in contemporary India. The text I use for this purpose is the one to which all theories in the preceding units have been applied: 'An Introduction' by Kamala Das. I use this poem as a means to open up areas of challenge and development in Indian feminisms today, not as an end of study in itself.

---

### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

---

Born in 1934 and self-avowedly multilingual, Kamala Das seems, at first glance to be an obvious choice for a 'representative' of contemporary Indian feminist concerns. She can claim to speak *to* a postindependence generation while not being wholly *of* it herself. 'An Introduction' in particular is reflective of the gradual ebb-tide of Nehruvian India. Fifteen years down the road from the trauma of postindependence, it can claim a disenchanted aloofness from both the zenith and the nadir of the national idea. It allows its poet a space within which she can analyse the political and literary consequences *first* of writing in English despite a multilingual inheritance, *next* of writing outside a political structure despite living at a moment of political interest, *then* of writing as an Indian woman and *finally* of writing for and from women's experience.

To me however 'An Introduction' is more interesting when I read it against the grain. I ask myself an opposite set of questions. *First* does the poem work because it is in English (rather than in a more traditional Indian language) or in spite of this? *Next* what are the politics (the structures of power) embodied *or* interrogated by the poem? *Then* is there indeed such a person as 'an Indian woman'? What about qualifiers such as class, religion, caste, education and region? *Finally* what is lost by positing a body of women's experience?

## 6.2 SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

### 6.2.1 The Age

'An Introduction' (1962) is the product of a context which another writer has described in this way:

My generation was the first to come of age after India became independent of British rule. It therefore had to face a situation in which tensions implicit until then had come out in the open and demanded to be resolved without apologia or self-justification: tensions between the cultural past of the country and its colonial past, between the attractions of western modes of thought and our own traditions, and finally between the various visions of the future that opened up once the common cause of political freedom was achieved. (Karnad, 1)

I find this extract useful in what it tells me of the relationship between politics and culture in the India of the nineteen sixties. *First* it shows that an Indian writer of this period has to take into account the relationship between Indian and colonial inheritance. For instance, what language will such a writer choose? Will it be English, Hindi, or a regional language? If you look at Das's poem you will see how she foregrounds this question. I will consider the implications of the answer she makes in 6.3.1 but just now I'd like you to simply keep the question in mind. *Next* there is the related issue of the cultural model chosen by the writer. Ought this to be a vaguely 'Western' or an 'Indian' model? If Indian, should it be the characteristic model associated with no particular religion, region, or dialect? 'An Introduction' is written as a dramatic monologue in blank verse. This literary mode is of course associated with Victorian or nineteenth-century England. How does this affect *your* response to the poem? Do you think that this blurs its social relevance or Das's independence of the need to represent a particular region? Of course you might argue that the poem recovers an area of experience — women's experience — that might otherwise remain a forgotten region. *Finally* there is the question of pluralism — the 'various visions of the future' — that presents itself once nationhood has been achieved. How will the visions of Indian women in the postindependence era be different from those of their male counterparts in terms of personal and national issues?

### 6.2.2 Position of Women

I'd like to discuss this area with reference to two contexts: national and international. *Nationally* there is a sense in which post-independence has seen women's movements challenging and reshaping national identity. Indeed they have creatively destabilised this concept itself. 'In most languages, the literary canons had been established in the early 1950s shortly after Independence. They were therefore charged with constructing an imagined community and sculpting the new citizen (Lalita & Tharu, xvii). In other words one common theme in Indian feminisms today may well be the vexed relationship between the question of a woman's identity and that of national identity. Whenever you next re-read 'An Introduction' for instance try to work out whether the poem suggests that women have or do not have a place in the shaping of political power structures. How, if at all, is the Indian state sensitive to the Indian woman? Conversely how can literature urge Indian women to challenge and change the face of the Indian state?

The *international* context opens up another area of dissatisfaction. Contemporary Indian feminist writers feel the inadequacies of Western feminist theories and the need to develop models of their own that are more culturally sensitive. Look for instance at this criticism of Showalter's concept of gynocritics. 'As [gynocritics] enumerates the themes and sets up the agenda for women's writing the world over, therefore, the present-day concerns of Western feminists are writ large to encompass the world, and the world collapses into the West' (Lalita & Tharu, 26-7). Earlier (5.4.1) I'd discussed the way in which Showalter's theory has been criticised by African-American writers for its attempt to represent all women's experience without taking factors of race and class into consideration. I think though that the challenge offered to gynocritics by Lalita and Tharu is more radical in that it suggests that American feminist theory is an integral part of Western cultural imperialism. It removes texts from their cultural contexts (both race-based and class-based). It exploits other cultures for evidence to support its theoretical projects. Ultimately American feminism evolves a theory that it markets as universally acceptable. Do *you* agree with this criticism and if you do, what concerns do you think should shape Indian feminist theories?

---

## 6.3 THE TEXT

---

### 6.3.1 Its Constituency

Try to work backwards from the text and deduce its constituency. As I suggested earlier [6.2.1] the fact that it uses blank verse in English suggests that its target-audience is urban and middle-class since in India Western cultural models are accessible chiefly to these categories of people. The use of English means also that the difficulties of translation, editing and publication that confront the writer who works in a regional language are absent. 'An Introduction' thus lends itself admirably to being anthologised and it is no accident that it has been picked up by the Norton anthology of women's writing. It can be taken out or extrapolated from its original context and presented (as its title suggest) *as* an introduction to, say, the position of Indian women to a non-Indian audience. For these reasons it might seem to accept rather than challenge the cultural assumptions of gynocriticism. It seems all too easy for a poem such as this to be 'plundered' for its apparent representation of India for a foreign readership. I thus find myself in two minds about the constituency of 'An Introduction.' On the *one* hand I'm glad that — even if their appeal is restricted amongst Indian readers — they are in free circulation. On the *other* I find this very restriction makes such texts conformist in appeal rather than radical. What if — like gynocritics — they buttress the very structures of power they should question?

### 6.3.2 Its Content

Nonetheless I think 'An Introduction' poses essential and disturbing questions. It begins by showing how — in post-independence India — to be a woman is to know that structures of power operate away from oneself: 'I don't know politics but I know the names/ Of those in power, and can, repeat them like / Days of the week or names of months, beginning with/ Nehru ...' I think it is a serious comment that highlights the inadequacies of the development both of power-structures *and* of women's movements in India. It shows that each is completely irrelevant to the other and thus is critical of both. The poem goes on to ventilate the issue of language. Here again I think the defence made by Das is courageous. I think she exemplifies not just the artist insisting on her creative autonomy over her medium and material but also the woman refusing to allow the critical establishment to dictate to her. After all if

feminist theories are a protest against the patriarchies of the academy and the world which prescribe to a woman what she is to say and how she is to say it, I think Das's comment is gutsy. 'Don't write in English, they said, / English is not your mother-tongue. Why not leave / Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins, / Every one of you? Why not let me speak / Any language I like? The language I speak / Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses / All mine, mine alone.' Finally — while I believe that specificities of region and class are crucial — I also believe there are areas of women's experience that can in some ways be seen outside these contexts as well. Child-abuse, prostitution and rape are explored in the poem. I think the notion of women as constituting a class — indeed an oppressed class — is addressed in this way by the poem. Why should economic and regional factors alone be taken as determinants of class? I think the conclusion moving for this reason. It speaks *of* and *to* women's experience rather than *for* it. '...it is I who drink lonely / Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of strange towns, / It is I who laugh, it is I who make love? And then feel shame ... I too call myself I.'

---

## 6.4 ITS CONTRIBUTION

---

### 6.4.1 Immediately

The headnote in the Norton edition describes Das so as to suggest something of her immediate context: '... [she has] established a reputation as a lyricist who defies the traditional taboos placed on upper-class married Indian women, specifically the taboo against candid sexual expression.' To the extent that Das's work evokes something of this quality of exoticism that marks the feminism of Nehruvian India: its anglicised, upper-class nature I think it is representative and thus valuable. Does this however limit its application?

### 6.4.2 Subsequently

The direction taken later by Indian feminist movements however (as the Tharu-Lalita anthology shows) has been toward greater pluralism. There has been a huge increase in interest in work done in Indian languages which use cultural modes from local and regional traditions. There has also been a growing involvement in the empowerment of dalit women and a corresponding interest in dalit women's writing. The anglicised frame of reference and the cultural model for 'An Introduction' seem retrogressive in the light of these developments. The content of the poem, however, remains I think disturbingly valid.

---

## 6.5 LET US SUM UP

---

Feminist theories intervene in the processes of the world and of the academy so as to reveal gender-biases in the reading, writing and teaching of literature. Certain concerns of feminist theories have a continuing relevance. The recognition that education is integral to the emancipation of women — literally and metaphorically — has Mary Wollstonecraft as its early formulator in eighteenth-century England. Anxieties about the need of economic and artistic independence for women are voiced by Virginia Woolf in the England of the nineteen-twenties. The anxiety that woman is viewed as 'Man's Other' rather than as an independent human being with her own rights and needs animates the work of Simone de Beauvoir in postwar France. Gynocritics, a model of women's culture has been developed by Elaine Showalter in the American academy over the nineteen-seventies and eighties.

Contemporary Indian feminisms demand a more radical recognition of factors of cultural difference such as region, religion and class.

Elaine Showalter

Feminist theories have been concerned to challenge the orthodoxies of patriarchy as these shape cultural practice primarily through the canon. In their turn feminist theories are challenged by the very cultural imperialisms they set out to change. The debate between feminist theories and other kinds of critical theory and cultural practice is thus as ongoing as the dialogue between women and men.

---

## 6.6 GLOSSARY

---

|           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Apologia  | A written defence or explanation                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Nehruvian | Adjective used to describe the period (1947-1965) when Jawaharlal Nehru was independent India's first Prime Minister. It connotes a period of optimism with regard to an independent, socialist and secular India. |

---

## 6.7 QUESTIONS

---

- Q 1. . Explain how the strengths and weaknesses of its constituency are those of 'An Introduction' as well.
- Q 2. . What issues would you want included, were 'An Introduction' to be updated for the new millennium?

---

## 6.8 SUGGESTED READING

---

- |                            |                                                                                           |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Tharu, Susie and K. Lalita | <i>Women Writing in India: 600 B C to the Present.</i> 2 Vols. Delhi: O.U.P. 1991 & 1993. |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

## NOTES