
UNIT 1 WAYS OF READING AND INTERPRETING

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

Why do we read literature at all? Of course, some of the most obvious reasons are that we all enjoy a good story, appreciate vivid descriptions and imagery or feel that something that we think and perceive has been well expressed - or we may read even just to pass the time. You may have other reasons to add to this list. But apart from all these, in many ways, the reading of literature equips us with a level of sophistication that enables us to view, compare, analyse and internalise cultural values and relate them to real life situations. We are thus in the position of making an informed choice when confronted with complex dilemmas in our own life.

When we talk about literature, is it possible to ignore language? Literature cannot be divorced from language and, as the poet Robert Frost said in another context, the sensible and sensitive reader would not like to view language and literature as separate entities encased in water tight compartments. What is literature but language that is descriptive - on the one plane of the mental, inner space of ideas and emotions and on the other, the physical spaces of this universe? In this unit we will examine the relationships between gender, language and literature with the help of examples from western and Indian literary histories.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, you will be able to:

- Analyse various issues related to theorising writing by men and women;
- Discuss how men and women use language for communication;
- Explain gender perspectives and biases and their influence on literary criticism; and
- Critically analyse the different gendered perceptions and versions of the literary text.

1.3 PERSPECTIVES FROM LANGUAGE

Even if we'd like to think that language is language after all and how does it matter who is using it, there are those (both literary critics and ordinary readers) who claim that they can spot the differences in the way men and women use language. But we must consider that language varies in the ways it is used as a mode of communication, or talking to anyone. So what we are essentially saying is that it is more important to look at how language is used differently when describing men or women and, more importantly, the ways in which words are used differently when actually communicating with men or women.

When we look at writing, say any literary writing, there are generally two perspectives from which it can be viewed -read and interpreted. One is at the level of language - the grammar, the structure of the sentences, the vocabulary, etc. The other is deeper and probably of greater consequence -the ideas, feelings, concepts that are being expressed. Writing can therefore be dense and simple at the level of language and/or at the level of ideas. You may be wondering, does writing by men and women differ in these two respects? Let us first look at the linguistic component and the various conclusions arrived at over the years.

Check Your Progress 1:

At this point we would encourage you to put down very briefly what you think are the differences in the ways in which people of different genders use language. Do you think that there are any marked characteristics that are specific to a particular gender?

Some conclusions that have been drawn from studies state that there are broadly sixteen language features that appear to differentiate gender in a consistent manner. To state these briefly, investigations have shown that men tend to use more ‘references to quantity’ and employ more ‘judgmental adjectives’. On the other hand, women appear to use more ‘intensive adverbs’ and make more ‘references to emotions’. Women also were seen to use more evasions and extremely polite forms, append tag questions to their statements, emphasise words and phrases in a distinct way through intonation, try to be more correct with regard to grammar and pronunciation. They were seen to lack a sense of humour or inability to tell a joke effectively, and use more empty adjectives (Lakoff, 1973, p. 45-80).

However, in spite of the claims made regarding these differences, other researchers have asserted that they should not be thought of as “markers” of gender whose presence unerringly points to the gender of the speaker. Instead, they function as gender-linked “tendencies” to favour certain linguistic features over others (Mulac & Bradac, 1995, p. 83-104). Although there is widespread agreement among researchers that gender-linked language differences occur in a wide range of communication contexts, (Henley & Kramarae, 1991, p.18-43) a challenge to this view has recently appeared. Canary and Hause argue that meaningful differences in the communication strategies of men and women have not been found with any degree of consistency (Canary and Hause, 1993, p. 141). In various studies that have been conducted, it was found that most language features were used equally by males and females. So, as we can see, the studies appear largely contradictory.

Mulac and his colleagues have demonstrated that the language of men and women leads them to be judged differently on psychological dimensions that are of consequence (Mulac & Bradac, 1995, p. 83-104). The almost universal finding is that readers of brief transcripts of women’s language rate them higher on socio-intellectual status (i.e., higher social status and more literate) and higher on aesthetic quality (more pleasant and beautiful). Men are rated higher on dynamism (stronger and more aggressive).

Does all this sound confusing?! It might be a good idea to stop at this point and then come back and read the previous paragraphs again slowly to get the main thrust of the arguments.

Check Your Progress 2:

It might be helpful, informative and revealing of general attitudes if you were to prepare a questionnaire for friends and family on people's views regarding the language of men and of women. You could have questions like: Who talks more? Who is more assertive? Who is more supportive? Who can convey something humorous or witty in a better way? Who is more convincing? And so on.

Based on the answers to these questions, you can prepare a short report on conceptions of verbal features that are seen to be typical of men and of women. Now try to co relate them with what you think and have observed for yourself as well as what has been said above.

It may perhaps be more accurate to say at this point that language or the ways of using language either through the spoken or the written word, cannot be traced to a woman's or a man's instinct or to a biological cause but can be seen to rise out of various factors like genre, tradition, memory and context. A poem, for instance, would require different language and stylistic devices than a formal letter (an example of language dictated by genre). Also, various forms of communication are traditionally expressed in a certain way with specific linguistic features, regardless of the gender of the speaker/writer - like speaking to an older person, for instance. A person relies to a great extent of memory for language. Depending on what one has learnt in childhood, the schools one has attended, the friends one had and the books one has read etc., every individual has a certain 'set' of vocabulary items which is used creatively for communication. The individual is certainly not restricted by this 'set' but uses it in ways unique to him/her. And of course, the context is an extremely important factor in deciding what one says and the language one uses according to a particular situation. Who is addressing whom and in what circumstances, whether it is formal or informal and so on. All this, in turn, influences the way in which a piece of writing is read and interpreted.

Check Your Progress 3:

Listen carefully to conversations between men, women and a mixed group of men and women. Do you think that these conversations bear out or go against what you/people/linguists have to say? Why do you think the differences, if there are any, exist at all?

Now let us get back to the point where we said that language is important in the sense in which it is used to talk about men or women. There are certain features which point clearly to gender disparity - in pronominal references, verbal labels and other images used to refer to women and the portrayal of women characters in creative literature. For instance, Christianity brought in the concept of 'virgin-whore' into literature, creating characters that were starkly dichotomous. It was the archetype of the good girl versus the bad girl and was modelled on the Biblical figures of the pure Mother Mary and the apparently opposing figure of the wanton woman - the other Mary - Mary Magdalene. Portrayals based on this are still to be found in literature and representations in mass media and forms of popular culture.

While language is often seen to disparage women, it certainly defines them in various ways - for instance, while men are referred to in occupational terms, women are referred to in relational terms (Amit is a teacher, Amita is Ankit's wife etc.) Neutral occupational terms are given female modifiers (woman writer). In addition to this, women's names are prefixed with titles that denote the presence or absence of an authorised relation to a male (Miss, Mrs) while men do not have any such gender-biased prefixes before their names. While 'Ms.' has come into the language in order to correct this discrimination, it has not caught on universally and it does not have any equivalence in regional languages. There are other socio-linguistic markers of inequity like the name of the male coming first (Mr. and Mrs.), changing of surnames and even first names of the woman after marriage, the child carrying on the father's name and so on.

Over the years, the meaning and connotation of many words have changed in the English language, usually at the expense of women as Lakoff observed in studies he conducted (Lakoff, 1973, p. 45-80). Some examples would be: master - mistress; wizard - witch; dog - bitch; fox - vixen; sir - madam etc.

in which the word denoting the feminine gender has acquired pejorative connotations. Objects that are relatively small or insignificant or substitutes are named in a feminine way - kitchenette, leatherette - while the generic term is usually always masculine ('mankind has taken enormous technological strides'; 'the tiger is an endangered species'). Male-centred categorisations predominate in most languages and they subtly influence our understanding and perception of reality.

Have you ever noticed that most insults target women even when they are directed at men? In particular, sexual insults always refer to the man's female relations in a derogatory and offensive manner.

It must be quite obvious to you by now that language practices accomplish gender. Language and identity are crucially interwoven and we can and must make language choices in terms of who we want to be or, perhaps more importantly, who we want to be perceived as. It is important to be aware and sensitive enough to see how words resonate with meaning and to make a conscious, empowered choice to choose language that becomes an index of our identity and thus make sure that we become not victims of language, but agents.

Let us now take a look at previous opinions about writing by women. Concepts of creativity, literary history or literary interpretation were, for a long time, and still, in some measure continue to be, based entirely on male experience and put forward as universal.

Box 1.1

Activity 1: Keeping in mind what has been said, make a list of words in your mother tongue that uses the masculine gender to denote superiority and the feminine gender in a derogative way.

1.4 PERSPECTIVES FROM LITERATURE

Women writers are often taken less seriously than their male counterparts. Is the difference to do with style, genre or experience? Some textual critics assert that the difference is perceived by the reading experience. The perspectives from which we read can be from the biological, linguistic, psychoanalytical or cultural perspectives.

Victorian physicians believed that women's physiological functions divert 20% of their creative energy from brain activity. Victorian anthropologists thought that the frontal lobes of the brain were heavier and better developed in men and so women were less intelligent.

Women writers have been compelled to reinvent language so that they can communicate in ways that are not dependent on the dominant discourse and which do not rely overly much on masculine meaning and connotation. Adrienne Rich puts it well when she says that “if the imagination is to transcend and transform experience, it has to question, to challenge, to conceive the alternative, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment. You have to be free to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate; nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call experimentally by another name. For writing is re-naming” (Rich, 1992, p. 503).

Another critic, Mary P. Hiatt says that although ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ are terms that are ostensibly used to denote the styles of writing (of men and women), what they actually do is illustrate the male perspective of both men and women. She offers examples such as descriptions like “strong,” “rational,” and “logical” for men, and “emotional,” “hysterical,” and “silly” for women (Hiatt, 1978, p. 222). So we can say that the primary goal of feminism in composition studies was to fashion a space where women could view themselves intellectually and where their voices could resonate with meaning. In a patriarchal society, sexual politics often determine what gets written and what is valued in the anthropological canon.

Hélène Cixous feels that “it is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded - which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist” (Cixous, 1976, p. 883). Lisa Tuttle defines feminist theory as asking “new questions of old texts.” She cites the goals of feminist criticism as: (i) to develop and uncover a female tradition of writing (ii) to interpret symbolism of women’s writing so that it will not be lost or ignored by the male point of view (iii) to rediscover old texts (iv) to analyse women writers and their writings from a female perspective (v) to resist sexism in literature (vi) to increase awareness of the sexual politics of language and style (Tuttle, 1986, p. 184).

Literature has always had a strong focus on gender issues right from the time of Sappho and Homer who wrote about marriage, relationships between women and their families and female sexuality. Philosophers also discussed the role of women in society, often in disparaging terms. It was during the Victorian era, with the emergence of the notion of women’s rights and the publication of more and more women’s writing that the contours of literary mindsets as related to women came to be refigured. There were extremes: on one hand was the notion of woman as angel that assigned to her the roles of companion, keeper of the home and hearth and conscience keeper to society. On the other hand was the new woman who, gradually realising that she could have some measure of freedom and a role over and above what had been prescribed so far, demanded that she be given the opportunity

to educate herself, to vote, to have a career and to lead a single life if she so wished. This figure was generally looked upon with suspicion, and a blot on 'respectable' society. Both kinds of stereotypes are to be found in Victorian literature and were read and judged according to the prevailing mindset.

With the advent of Freud and his concepts of castration anxiety, penis envy etc., literature written by or about women assumed different dimensions (Freud, 1932, p. 281-97). Freudian ideas, though denounced by later feminists as misogynistic and as a reflection of his own insecurities, did however colour Western perceptions of women in literature to a great degree.

Literature from Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia and Africa and also African American literature - both by women and about women - while talking about issues that other writing has dwelt on, also addresses basic issues that directly touch women's lives such as slavery and colonisation. Today, with women's emancipation so clearly established in a number of societies in varying degrees, literature more and more depicts the changing face of women's roles and activities and the still existent barriers on their path to self-actualisation.

1.5 REWRITING AND REFRAMING

The revising, rewriting and reframing of texts that have long been considered as classics, as part of the canon, is a way of presenting a counterpoint to the prevailing male voice. They can thus be said to be new ways of reading and interpreting texts. The telling of a story from another point of view can be seen as an attempt to explore and perhaps bridge, the spaces and silences in a text in order to give voice to the hitherto ignored. Writing has always been regarded as a strong form of control - culturally and morally - so the rewriting and reframing of texts that featured male superiority at their core can be viewed as an act of liberation for those who were depicted as subordinate or inferior. George Egerton says that "I realised that in literature, everything had been better done by man than woman could hope to emulate. There was only one small plot left for her to tell; the *terra incognita* of herself, as she knew herself to be, not as man liked to imagine her—in a word to give herself away, as man had given himself in his writing" (Gawsworth, 1972, p. 58).

Revisions of literary texts from the point of view of the voiceless (usually a woman) may not necessarily be by women, as we shall see later in this section. But all such revisions and retellings can be said to feature one or all of the following:

The text so revised and rewritten is inevitably oppositional; it questions and regenerates the established text; it fleshes out, extends and gives an added

dimension to the female character(s) who have been portrayed as inferior or have been relegated to a position of neglect; it challenges the authority of the prevailing text.

Check your Progress 4:

Look at any familiar text/ story you have read or heard without really thinking about the way in which the female character has been portrayed. If the character is shown as meek and subservient, inhabiting a world that is ruled by men and with no voice of her own to protest against indignities she is subjected to, how can the story be told differently with the framework given above?

Let us now look at some examples of western literary texts that have been re-told from the perspective of one of the female characters.

1.5.1 Literature of the West

Literature is replete with female characters like the mad Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre* or the enigmatic lady in white with whose escape from an insane asylum Wilkie Collins's book of the same name takes off or Gustave Flaubert's delusional Emma in *Madame Bovary*, to name a few. But many people would question if they were really mad or mentally imbalanced when viewed from today's perspective or whether they were women who were grossly misunderstood by the society of that time or were misfits in that world and hence termed insane. They may today be considered to be women with strongly independent or 'liberated' values - hence an embarrassment to their families and the strait-laced notions concerning women at that time - and condemned to be locked away out of sight in attics or asylums or to be driven mad by society, as much of the criticism points out.

In the Victorian age, the number of women confined to mental asylums was far greater than that of men. There were many others who were pushed away out of sight like Bertha and kept in dingy attics in secret as insanity was somehow considered to be a taint on the family reputation. What exactly constituted insanity at that time? It could be female behaviour that

did not conform to the norms of the time and which seemed to be too unrestrained, too free and sexually uninhibited. “Attics are where wives who cannot be contained, who are over-sexualised and unruly are stored away,” says writer and psychotherapist, Adam Phillips (Phillips, April 20, 2010, BBC Interview).

When Jean Rhys read *Jane Eyre* as a child, the character of Bertha Mason touched her and she thought she would give Bertha a ‘life’ and she did just that in her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In the book, she tells the story of Antoinette Cosway, a Creole heiress who grew up in the West Indies, is married off to an Englishman and is taken away from her home to England. He also gives her a new name - Bertha - thus completely obliterating all links with her past. In this novel, Rhys’ Antoinette creates a haunting new dimension to Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha is a voiceless character who, even if she had not been insane in the first place, might very easily have turned so given the fact that she was locked up with the alcohol-sodden Grace all the time. Rhys tells the story that Bronte did not - of the mad woman in the attic - and constructs an explanatory narrative both from Bertha’s point of view and Rochester’s as well. She thus turns Bronte’s classic inside out and offers a critical view of the power of patriarchy as manifested in marital bonds and the societal controls that support gender inequality.

It is noteworthy that Rochester, who plays such a huge role in Bronte’s book and in Bertha’s life, is not named in Rhys’s book. Gayatri Spivak observes, “Rhys denies to Bronte’s Rochester the one thing that is supposed to be secured in the Oedipal relay: the Name of the Father, or the patronymic. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the character corresponding to Rochester has no name” (Spivak, 1985, p.252). Since *Jane Eyre* was already a canonical text when Rhys wrote her book, the trajectory of Antoinette’s life would have to have been more or less similar to Bronte’s Bertha. However, there is one significant difference where the end is concerned: while Bronte’s character sets the house on fire and perishes in the flames, Rhys’s Antoinette dreams of the fire and of leaping to her death but the novel ends there without a description of her death but only with her resolution to act. By leaving it open-ended, Rhys lets the reader imagine that the character may have a different fate from that of Bronte’s Bertha, therefore extending the possibilities of the earlier text.

In *Mama Day*, published in 1993, Gloria Naylor’s revision of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Naylor names her main character Miranda. Thus, she shifts the focus from Prospero in Shakespeare’s play to the daughter, one of the least empowered characters in the original. And, if Prospero had been the one to instruct his daughter and lay down the law, in Naylor’s text, Miranda is a matriarch who rules over not only her household but the island too and takes on the might of corporate giants to boot. Naylor’s *Miranda Day*,

George, and Ruby closely parallel Shakespeare's Caliban, Prospero, Miranda, and Alonso. By portraying powerful black women, Naylor makes use of a classic Shakespeare play to assert racial and sexual differences and question the system of white European patriarchy in *The Tempest*.

We can find similar examples of revisionary literary texts in India. Let us turn to some of these in the next section

1.5.2 Literature of India

In *Saba Vimosanam*, a Tamil story, published in 1943, Pudhumaipittan takes up the story of Ahilya from where it is left off in the Ramayana. Once she is free of the curse and has turned back into a woman, she and her husband, the Rishi Gautama take up the reins of their household once again, trying to forget the past and forge new bonds of togetherness with each other. When Rama returns victorious from Lanka, he comes to their ashram, accompanied by Sita who tells Ahilya in a very matter-of-fact manner, about her trial by fire - the *agni pariksha*. Ahilya is horrified and asks her why she submitted to such a thing to which Sita replies that Rama had asked her to do so. Interestingly enough, Ahilya poses a question to Sita twice: did *he* ask you to do this? The first time she does so, she uses the respectful honorific (the pronoun prevalent in most Indian languages to denote the third person 'he' when referring to someone elderly or highly respected) for Rama but the second time, after Sita confirms that he did indeed ask her to, Ahilya makes use of the ordinary honorific. Thus, within the space of a sentence, and by just changing the pronoun, the author conveys how Ahilya's respect - bordering on worship - for Rama comes crashing down. She then turns voluntarily back into stone as a protest against the victimisation of women and their humiliation in a patriarchal society. Her gesture is meant to indicate that she'd rather be an inanimate object than a woman inhabiting such a heartless society. Pudhumaipittan thus re tells the myth from another perspective and questions the patriarchal concepts of purity and chastity.

In the Hindi poem, *Saket*, published in 2008, in *Granthavali* Vol. 4, Maithili Sharan Gupta looks at the sequence of events in the Ramayana from the perspective of Urmila, Lakshmana's wife who is left behind in Ayodhya while Rama, Lakshmana and Sita go away to the forest for fourteen years. In this work (which can be described as a good example of alternate histories), we hear Urmila speaking about what it is like to be in Ayodhya without the three celebrated characters. In the paeans sung in praise of the ideal brother, Lakshmana, where is the song for Urmila? Why is she not celebrated as the ideal wife? Maithili Sharan Gupta's verse is an attempt to bring her into our field of awareness and foreground her point of view. In doing so, he gives voice to someone who has been silenced and perhaps all but forgotten in our collective consciousness.

Another poem published in 2008 in *Granthavali* Vol. 5, by Maithili Sharan Gupta, *Sakhi Ve Mujhse Keh Kar to Jaate*, is a plaintive statement by Yashodhara, wife of Prince Siddhartha (later Gautama Buddha) of the fact of his having left her and their son without a word while they were sleeping. How shattering must it have been to her when she discovered that her husband had stolen away under the cover of darkness without a word of goodbye to her?! In an era when women were entirely dependent on their husbands and when their very existence was justified only if they had one living, what would this desertion have meant to her? She wonders whether he had thought that she might have stopped him but counters it by saying that women readily prepare and send their men off to war so then why would she have made an exception in this case and tried to stand in the way of his quest for Truth? Gupta's short but touchingly effective poem draws a sketch of Yashodhara as a strong woman who voices her anguish and drives home the point of being a partner in the relationship who, if not consulted, should have been at least told about her husband's decision. The poem highlights the fact that, Gautama Buddha, for all his wisdom and philosophy and enlightenment, if seen from Yashodhara's perspective, was yet a man who simply left his home and went away without telling his wife.

The Australian poet, Kate Llewellyn's poem, *Penelope*, published in 1987, is a witty reply to fellow Australian, AD Hope's *The End of the Journey*, his own re-telling of the Ulysses myth where he describes the doughty warrior, now returned home, as 'an old man sleeping with his housekeeper'. Penelope, his wife, is an old woman too now and as he looks around his island home, he wonders whether this was what he had resisted the call of the sirens for. But what of Penelope - the epitome of the faithful wife - left behind for years together while her husband-king roams the farthest corners of the globe, never knowing when he would return or indeed if he would return at all?

All our epics abound with descriptions of adventurous gallants and the saga of their journeys; not one makes the attempt to plumb the depths of the emotions of the women left behind. Kate Llewellyn describes the feelings of Penelope during all the years of his absence and then her reactions on his return. In this poem, Penelope is an older woman with a mind of her own, capable of self-analysis and understanding. The point that Llewellyn very clearly and unequivocally makes is that Penelope had remained faithful not out of overwhelming love for her absent husband but because of her reluctance to cross the strict standards (albeit double) set by society in a world in which men have all the rights and women all the duties.

It is important to remember - as can be seen by the above illustrations - that such revisions or revisiting of canonical texts or established stories have been done by both men and women and have not been the sole prerogative of women alone. *Jane Eyre* for instance, was written by a

woman and reframed by another as *Wide Sargasso Sea* while Maithili Sharan Gupta and Pudhumaipitthan (both men) have retold or presented stories and situations from a woman's point of view.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have seen how language can be used to define or shape gender and how it is often used as an instrument to assert dominance over a particular group or relegate it to inferiority. Language can also be used in literature to convey abstractions of thought and feeling through sometimes just a single word.

There have been numerous theories about the use of language by men and women but so far none of them have been proved conclusively when actual speaking and writing practices by the different genders have been surveyed. While some theorists were of the view that physical or biological differences accounted for the different ways in which men and women use language, others held that they were inherently 'programmed' to use language differently.

Writing by women was also not taken seriously as it was felt that women did not perhaps have the same level of intellectual calibre required to create a profound or substantial piece of writing. This was probably what prompted some women to assume male pseudonyms - the most notable of them being George Eliot and George Sand.

Writing of canonical texts or re-telling a familiar story from a different perspective - usually that of a neglected or maligned female character in the original narrative - is an exercise that has been performed by both men and women. In most cases, the revision revitalises the original and affords a fresh or novel way of looking at a familiar situation from another point of view. It serves to remove stereotypes established by a patriarchal mindset and forces the reader to question and evaluate accepted notions of 'good' and 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong'.

1.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) What are the prominent theories regarding the use of language by men and women?
- 2) How were physiological factors supposedly responsible for various patterns of language use?
- 3) What are the features of language that reveal a marked bias against women?
- 4) What did women feel that they needed to express through their writing?

- 5) How does the reframing or re-telling of myths and stories help to furnish the female perspective? Use examples from both western and Indian literary traditions to illustrate your response.

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UNIT 2 WAYS OF WRITING

Anuradha Marwah

Structure

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Objectives
- 2.3 Writing Gender
- 2.4 The Woman Writer
- 2.5 Resistance and Women's Writings
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2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, you read about the relationships between gender and different ways of reading and interpreting literary texts. In this unit, we will discuss how gender is constructed by writing. We will begin with an attempt to understand writing - not mystifying it or prioritising the writer over the readers but conceptualising the writer and her readers in a dynamic and creative relationship with each other. We will go on to discuss how gender operates in writing. Is writing truly an androgynous activity as some writers have asserted? How far can the writer claim 'impersonality' vis a vis her text? What is the scope of the hyphenated identity 'woman-writer' that at times seems narrow and constricting to some. From there we will go on to ask the question whether women's writing is a legitimate literary category and to assess whether any political value can be attached to women's writing per se.

Earlier generations of feminists conceptualised women's writing in terms of the resistance it offers to established social and literary norms. Indeed, resistance is an important trope in women's writing. In most societies and cultures women's writing appeared chronologically later than that by men, and women writers had to struggle to find literary space. Women also managed to challenge patriarchy and notions of high art when, newly educated, they put pen to paper to represent a world of experiences that had until then remained invisible and unsung. Censorship of all kinds - formal and informal - is an obstacle that many women writers have to combat even today. Thus, marginality on the one hand and re-

conceptualization of the literary canon on the other hand defined the purposes of women's writing and, as societies remain unequal, continue to do so.

However, the marketability of certain kinds of women's writing cannot be overlooked as such bestsellers give women visibility; unfortunately, at the same time, these bestsellers work to contain the feminist agenda. Genres like domestic novels and popular romance have or have had immense commercial viability. The market impacts greatly and often conservatively on the construction of gender by reaffirming and celebrating existing stereotypes. It has been argued that liberatory spaces are created in zones that are not necessarily feminist in orientation simply by the virtue of their belonging overwhelmingly to women. To fully understand the scope and limitations of women's writing we would need to assess the political space created by these conventional 'women-only' genres where the writer and the readers are defining their identities on the basis of the commonality of their experiences as wives, mothers, and sweethearts.

2.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Describe the relationship between the categories, 'woman' and 'writer';
- Explain the political purpose and legitimacy of women's writing;
- Discuss the various kinds of censorship women writers confront;
- Critically analyse questions of gender with respect to genre; and
- Describe the relationship between feminist agendas and popular fiction.

2.3 WRITING GENDER

What do we mean by 'writing'? Does it emanate exclusively from the writer? Or is writing the result of a far more complex negotiation that takes place between the writer and her readers - both actual and projected? These questions are important when we discuss the construction of gender via writing as we need to understand how exactly gender norms are perpetrated, challenged or recreated in literature. The term author - with its obvious connotation of authority - is a contested category in the present time. In an influential essay entitled "Death of the Author" published in 1967, the French theorist Roland Barthes argued against limiting the reading of the text to the intentions of the author and made a persuasive case for broadening the focus of creativity to language and readers. Barthes meant to liberate the text from the authority of the Author-God, inviting the reader to 'disentangle' the text in order to create its meaning 'here and now'. To quote from his conclusion:

“Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations to dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted.” (Barthes, 1967)

It was a revolutionary thought to dislodge the ‘Author-God’ in the realm of literature. By extension all authoritative ‘meaning’ ascribed to the text by ‘Critics’, who performed the priest-like function of mediating between the writer and the readers, could also fall by the wayside, making it possible to reconceptualise writing as a truly secular and democratic activity.

However, feminist writers and thinkers, also intent on democratising literature, had been following a slightly different trajectory from the above. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century they had started to challenge the literary canon for its exclusion of women’s voices and their interventions were necessarily premised on the gender identity of writers. Why were all the writers who were considered great - and worthy of being included in the curriculum - male? The answer was sought in the socially disadvantaged position of women writers and the exclusion of women from the benefits of education and other means of broadening the mind like travel. But even more discriminatory was the attitude of critics who were found to overlook the ‘greatness’ of many women writers. Excavation of forgotten and overlooked women writers became the agenda for feminists at the time. Indeed, many interesting texts were brought to light leading to great enrichment and, arguably, complete transformation of the Western canon.

By the sixties and seventies feminist writers started to theorise about the distinguishing characteristics of women’s writing. Elaine Showalter’s “A Literature of their Own” (1977) is a case in point. Showalter discusses women’s writing as a subculture based on female solidarity arising from secretive and ritualised physical experiences. She shows the evolution of women’s literature, starting from the Victorian period to modern writing. She breaks down the movement into three stages – the Feminine, a period of imitation, beginning with the use of the male pseudonym in the 1840s, ending with George Eliot’s death in 1880; the Feminist, characterised by resistance, that she traces from 1880 till the winning of the vote in 1920;

and the Female, one of self-discovery, from 1920 till the present-day, including a “new stage of self-awareness about 1960.” Showalter also coined the term ‘gynocritics’ to suggest “the scholarship concerned with woman as the producer of textual meaning with the history, themes, genres, and structures of literature by women” (Showalter, 1977, p. 244).

The concept of *écriture féminine*, championed in France by writers and psychoanalysts such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray emerged in the seventies. Hélène Cixous first coined the term in her essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa”, where she asserts “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies” (Cixous, 1975, p. 875). The concept of *écriture féminine* was bound to the psychoanalytical ideas of femininity. Although it was conceded that some texts written by men could be marked by femininity too, the prevailing idea in Elaine Showalter’s words was: “the inscription of the feminine body and female difference in language and text” (Showalter, 1977, p. 249). This concept was criticised for essentialising the category women and being overly deterministic about writing.

By the 1980s Barthes’s hugely popular essay “Death of the Author” had gained an iconic status in the English speaking world. The line of thinking where the identity of the author was considered inconsequential had been taken up and developed by several other theorists. The shift of authority from the author seemed definitive as far as the new discipline of literary theory - that was revolutionising and transforming literary studies - is concerned. For feminists, too, it had important repercussions. In the words of the feminist critic Toril Moi, “In the 1980s, such theories started to conflict seriously with the interest in women’s writing. Feminists who wanted to work on women writers at the same time as they were convinced that Barthes, Derrida and Foucault were right, began to wonder whether it really mattered whether the author was a woman” (Moi, 2008, p. 261).

Feminist theory began to shift its focus from women’s writing even more so after Judith Butler destabilised the category ‘women’ in her path-breaking work *Gender Trouble* by conceptualising gender as ‘performative’ and the result of heterosexual and heteronormative power structures (Butler, 1990, Preface). The work had the valuable result of breaking down the existing binary of male and female and making the ambit of gender-identity much more inclusive.

Before we discuss and debate whether the categories ‘women’ or ‘woman writer’ matter, we must attempt answers to the questions that were asked in the beginning: What is writing? And does writing belong exclusively to the writer? Literary theory argues that writing cannot be separated from the act of reading and interpretation. Indeed, writing does not take place in a

social or intellectual vacuum. The writer writes as a result of, or in response to, other writings that she reads and interprets; as she writes, she interprets her own work; and her own writing is continuously modified by real and imagined readers' responses. However, the importance of the readers in configuring writing doesn't necessarily lead to the erasure of the author. Feminists have argued persuasively that the content, style, and the subsequent fate of the writing are bound with the gender-identity of the writer. To that extent the fact of being a woman writer is important - even if gender is argued to be only performative and even if biology is recognised to be inconsequential in determining the kind of writing a writer does. Toril Moi points to the limitations of existing theory that stops at explaining the origins of gender but does not go on to define a political agenda: "If I want to justify my view of women's situation in society, or on the rights of gays and lesbians, I can not do this simply by explaining how these phenomena have come into being. I need, rather, to set out my principles for a just and equitable society, or for how people ought to treat one another, or explain why I think freedom is the highest personal and political value' (Moi, 2005, p. 263).

It also cannot be denied that in spite of significant theoretical interventions in the twentieth century to reconceptualise writing as a collaborative activity, the importance of individual writers has not only remained but grown manifold in the literary market. Books carry the name of their authors and are bought, read and interpreted accordingly. In fact, the cult of celebrity authors has intensified and spread all over the globe. Celebrated authors are prominent public figures and forces to reckon with in society. As the centrality of writers gets emphasized in the realm of literature, and societies remain unequal and discriminatory for women, it becomes more important now than it ever was before to dwell on the writer's role and responsibility in constructing gender.

Check Your Progress 1:

Think of any work of fiction that you have recently read. In your view, does it qualify as a work of a 'woman' or 'man' writer? On what do you base your response? Make a list of your justifications and try to critically analyse your own reasons.

2.4 THE WOMAN WRITER

In 1929 Virginia Woolf wrote about the unequal treatment meted out historically to all women and specifically to women writers. In her essay “Shakespeare’s Sister” she argues that in great literary works written by men the actual position of women in society is not reflected as almost all memorable women characters - from Cleopatra to Emma Bovary - are persons of extreme personalities and circumstances: “very various; heroic and mean; splendid and sordid; infinitely beautiful and hideous in the extreme; as great as a man, some think even greater.” (Woolf, 2005, p. 43). To give an idea of the odds actually faced by middle-class women, she envisages a woman writer, Shakespeare’s fictional sister, called Judith, who is as gifted as her brother. But of course, Woolf argues scathingly, such a woman would never have been able to write the plays Shakespeare did:

Box 2.2

“She had the quickest fancy, a gift like her brother’s, for the tune of words. Like him, she had a taste for the theatre. She stood at the stage door; she wanted to act, she said. Men laughed in her face. The manager - a fat, loose-lipped man - guffawed. He bellowed something about poodles dancing and women acting - no woman, he said, could possibly be an actress. He hinted - you can imagine what. She could get no training in her craft. Could she even seek her dinner in a tavern or roam the streets at midnight? Yet her genius was for fiction and lusted to feed abundantly upon the lives of men and women and the study of their ways. At last - for she was very young, oddly like Shakespeare the poet in her face, with the same grey eyes and rounded brows - at last Nick Greene the actor-manager took pity on her; she found herself with child by that gentleman and so - who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet’s heart when caught and tangled in a woman’s body? - killed herself one winter’s night and lies buried at some crossroads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle.

That, more or less, is how the story would run, I think, if a woman in Shakespeare’s day had had Shakespeare’s genius” (Woolf, 2005, p. 45-46).

The recipe for the woman writer’s liberation that Woolf provided in her celebrated essay has become a cliché: a room of one’s own and a private income. But this solution may seem too bourgeois to some. As the African American writer Alice Walker pointed out, many women, African American slave women particularly, attempted to write their liberation without even owning their own bodies (Walker, 1983, p. 670)

Besides, many women, especially those not in the Anglo-American mainstream, discovered that finding a place in the literary universe is not a matter of financial autonomy or what is recognised as modernity alone. In their introduction to *Women's Writing in India from 600 BC*, Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha outline the fascinating story of a collection of poems (*Radhika Santwanam* or Appeasing Radhika) that was written by a courtesan called Muddupalani in mid eighteenth century. Muddupalani was a well-regarded poet in the Thanjavur period of Telugu literature. But her work that celebrated Radhika's sexuality in a clever subversion of the classical form (where Krishna is the dominant lover and Radhika, only the passive beloved), was all but lost by the beginning of the twentieth century. It was with great difficulty that Nagratnamma - a patron of the arts, musician and distinguished courtesan, herself - was able to excavate the full text and reprint it in 1910. An unexpected furore greeted the publication of the text in colonial India and social reformers attacked it for its explicitness. The British government banned it. It was only in 1947 after the intervention of the Chief Minister that the ban could be lifted, and the text reissued. But once again, Tharu and Lalitha note, *Radhika Santwanam* faced similar criticism and ostracism on grounds of "obscenity" in independent India. When they tried to locate the full text, several Telugu scholars assured them that their efforts were misplaced as the text had little or no literary merit. Tharu and Lalitha foreground this story as an allegory of women's writing in the country. *Radhika Santwanam*, in their opinion, remains a transgressive text till date as it focuses on the sexual assertions of a woman. The intellectually evolved Thanjavur court could find place for it but, subsequently in the nineteenth century when the British were imposing Victorian morality on the subject race, or in the national and nationalistic period when the nation was being deified as a woman such writings would be considered suspect if not outright dangerous. It is not only 'tradition' or 'ignorance' that put constraints on women; ironically, notions of nationhood and social progress may also militate against women's writing.

In the light of the above, it is not very surprising that an overwhelming majority of women writers feel censored today. Interviewing writers from several languages in India for the volume *The Guarded Tongue: Women's Writing and Censorship in India* (2001), the editorial team found that censorship in contemporary India is more covert and indirect than openly repressive. They note in their introduction: "What do women write about? Everything under the sun, is the answer that one hears in chorus. What is it that women can't write about? There is a pause - and one group says (and this is almost unanimous): Religion, Politics and Sex. You then wonder: what is there left to write about?" (Women's WORLD, 2001, p. 3).

It would seem that the universe of Indian woman writers is teeming with immense possibilities by way of subject matter and an equal number of difficulties that crop up when they try and actualise these possibilities into literary texts.

2.5 RESISTANCE AND WOMAN'S WRITINGS

Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha seem to speak on behalf of all women of colour and in post-colonial situations when they outline their project of identifying women's writing in India from 600BC onwards in terms of its oppositional politics. The major principle for the selection of texts for the volume, they explain, was "What modes of resistance did they fashion? How did they avoid, question, play-off, rewrite, transform, or even undermine the projects set out for them?" (Tharu and Laitha, 1991, p.40). They also make a case for reading these texts for "the gestures of defiance and subversion implicit in them" (Tharu and Laitha, 1991, p. 39). Their efforts, they claim, are directed towards developing an aesthetic that does not lessen discontinuity, dispossession, or marginality but dramatizes and clarifies it (Tharu and Laitha, 1991, p. 39).

In this enterprise, although they are inspired by the significant feminist work done in the West - especially the English speaking world - they are acutely conscious of India's distinct socio-political history and subsequent difference from Western societies.

Alice Walker had similarly distanced black women's writing from white feminism in her 1974 essay "In Our Mothers' Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South." Referring to the heart-rending history of slave women in America Walker observes:

Box 2.3

"What did it mean for a Black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers' time? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood. Did you have a genius of a great-great-grandmother who died under some ignorant and depraved white overseer's lash? Or was she required to bake biscuits for a lazy backwater tramp, when she cried out in her soul to paint watercolors of sunsets, or the rain falling on the green and peaceful pasturelands? Or was her body broken and forced to bear children (who were more often than not sold away from her)-eight, ten, fifteen, twenty children-when her one joy was the thought of modeling heroic figures of Rebellion, in stone or clay?" (Walker, 1974, p. 669)

Yet, Walker argues from the vantage point of her mother's accomplishment as a gardener of unusual creativity, their spirit was never broken. Black women have been giving expression to their creativity in various ways - quilt-making, gardening, cooking. These 'Artists', Walker claims, are the progenitors of black women's writing; certainly not white male writers who make up the Anglo-American canon. However, Walker makes extensive use of spirituality in her theorisation that, according to some critics, blunts the

revolutionary point that she is making about the value of women's work. But it can hardly be denied that Walker's 'Womanism' with its focus on the solidarity of the Black community is a strong alternative to white feminism and greatly subverts conventional ideas about 'Literature' and 'writing', tracing the origin of women's writing to humble homely chores black women performed in contrast with the musty intellection of white male writers .

Thus, we see that the element of resistance that in the dominant Anglo-American Feminist thought has sometimes tended to get supplanted by individualistic 'self-discovery' or a withdrawal into a room of one's own is emphasized in feminisms arising in other contexts. In contemporary India, the championing of the cause of the dispossessed by Arundhati Roy in political essays like "The Greater Common Good" (Roy, 1999) - where she argues against the policies of the state from the point of view of the adivasi dispossessed by the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project in Narmada valley - may be seen as arising out of the feminist impulse of the woman writer to read the dominant discourse of progress against its grain and to inscribe the socio-political margins of society into the primary text of literature.

2.6 I AM NOT A WOMAN WRITER

Yet, how often have we heard a writer exclaim in exasperation, "I am not a woman-writer!" Several feminist writers like Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, and Shashi Deshpande have explored the identity-politics of being a 'woman writer' and often railed against the ghettoization such nomenclature leads to.

The political import of their denial to be slotted as 'women writers' should not be dismissed. With their refusal to be thus described they are problematizing:

- 'women's writing' as a distinct and separate literary category;
- the universality ascribed to the term 'women';
- the expectation that women would write about certain subjects;
- the identification of women's writing with certain genres.

The denial may also serve to:

- distance them from politically correct (and perceived to be 'limited') positions;
- enable them to claim universality as a writer.

These women writers have found that denial of their subjectivity (as women) is necessary if they want to be taken seriously as writers. The great twentieth-century American poet Elizabeth Bishop, for instance, refused to be included

in anthologies of women's poetry, insisting that she was a poet plain and simple, rather than a "woman poet." She wrote that "art is art and to separate writings, paintings, musical compositions, etc. into two sexes is to emphasize values that are *not* art." Echoing Roland Barthes's position on writers and writing, another major French writer of Russian Jewish origin, Nathalie Sarraute, snarled in an interview: "When I write I am neither man nor woman nor dog nor cat." (Moi, 2005, p. 123) The claim of impersonality that these women are making as writers is a political act and should be seen as such.

Toril moi argues that such denials are issued by women writers in the face of provocation. She also points out that no male writer ever feels constrained to point out that he is a writer, and not a man writer. This, she feels, is due to the unequal way in which men and women are regarded and clear indication that it is still a sexist society. Giving examples from contemporary American life, Moi concludes that the work of early feminist writers like Beauvoir is relevant even today precisely for this reason:

Box 2.4

"At the beginning of The Second Sex, Beauvoir shows that in a sexist society, man is the universal and woman is the particular; he is the One, she is the Other. This is Beauvoir's definition of sexism, and it underpins everything she writes in The Second Sex. This analysis is so simple that it is easy to overlook how brilliant it actually is, and how much work it will still do for us." (Moi, 2005, p. 169)

Thus, when a writer who has made a valuable contribution to the feminist agenda chafes against the nomenclature woman writer, she need not be seen to renege against the sisterhood. What she could be doing is extending this agenda as universal and claiming for it a more central space. She could also be distancing herself from a certain kind of writing by women that is saleable precisely because it is by women.

Check Your Progress 2:

If you were a writer, would you like to be known as a 'woman' or a 'man' writer? Why or why not? Think about the various issues before writing your response.

2.7 GENRE, GENDER AND MARKET

In her article entitled “Writers, Plain and Simple”, Claire Messud commends women writers for refusing to identify themselves so. She then delineates certain characteristics of the contemporary literary market in America - which she describes as the place for ‘world literature’ for a ‘global generation’ - that tie up very well with what we have been discussing up till now. Messud explores the paradox that although women have been identified as the largest segment of buyers of books, the major literary prizes or lists of ‘great writers’ are monopolised by men with very few women writers making the grade. Messud puts this phenomenon down to the sexism that still operates in the literary establishment. Justifying her decision to foreground women writers in the magazine, *Guernica*, she observes:

Box 2.5

“And yet, when given the chance to gather a selection of writers for the magazine, I didn’t hesitate: I knew at once that I wanted to showcase the work of women writers. Not because they’re women, but because they are writers whose work thrills and surprises me. And because, simply on account of their gender, they are too often overlooked by the silly popularity contests that are juries and boards and lists. This is not a question of the writers’ quality but of our society’s habits, and of a habitual—and primarily lazy—cultural expectation that male writers are somehow more serious, more literary, or more interesting” (Messud, 2010, February 1).

Messud is obviously talking about ‘literary fiction’ that goes on to formulate what we called the canon in preceding sections. We have already discussed how difficult it was for women writers to be included in the canon and Messud’s observations - read in the light of quotes from Toril Moi - make us realise that the situation has not changed as much as it should have.

Ironically, as Messud points out, women constitute the maximum buyers of books. Publishers and even writers have been long cognisant of the fact. Unofficial estimates put down eighty per cent of the fiction readership to be women. Eric Weiner narrates an interesting anecdote in NPT:

Box 2.6

“A couple of years ago, British author Ian McEwan conducted an admittedly unscientific experiment. He and his son waded into the lunch-time crowds at a London park and began handing out free books. Within a few minutes, they had given away 30 novels.

Nearly all of the takers were women, who were “eager and grateful” for the freebies while the men “frowned in suspicion, or distaste.” The inevitable conclusion, wrote McEwan in The Guardian newspaper: “When women stop reading, the novel will be dead” (Weiner, 2007, September 5)

Does the realization on the part of writers and publishers that the reading public is overwhelmingly female lead to more gender sensitive writing or writing by women? Messud complains: “Here’s the deal: men, without thinking, will almost without fail select men. And women, without thinking, will too often select men” (Messud, 2010, February 1). One needs to emphasize that sexist cultural expectations are shared by women writers and readers as well. One may come across cases of women readers prioritising the male vision simply because they’ve been conditioned to do so in a sexist society. As Tharu and Lalitha point out in their introduction to *Women’s Writing in India*: “Women writers - critics and editors of anthologies no less - are clearly as imbricated in the ideologies of their times as men are; patriarchies take shape and are transformed in specific historical circumstances. Not all literature written by women is feminist or even about women. Neither is the scope of women’s writing restricted to allegories of gender oppression” (Tharu and Laitha, 1991, p.38).

With their focus on selling more and more and making a profit, market forces do not necessarily encourage a feminist vision of society even though their target might be women consumers. What they most definitely do is promote the production of books that a large number of women may be persuaded to buy. They do that via genres that deploy conventional concerns and interests associated with women: domestic novels of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century is one such example and popular romance and chick lit in early twentieth and late twentieth century are other examples. The first emphasizes women’s role as home-maker and the second, as sweethearts, partners and wives. At times women in the latter genres are represented as challenging men’s privileges in society leading to what has come to be called ‘pop-feminism’ and ‘lipstick feminism’.

In the contemporary market place popular romance and chick lit are classified under Popular, Commercial or Genre fiction and in respect of these genres the role of women writers vis a vis their male counterparts is reversed just as it was in the case of domestic fiction in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The authorship of these novels needs to be necessarily female. Just as Writers of ‘serious’ fiction like Mary Evans (George Eliot) in the nineteenth century preferred to hide behind a masculine *nom de plume* (pen name), male writers who write popular romances these days change their names to female ones. A good example would be the writers writing under various assumed names and published by Mills and Boon publishers. Well known instances of chick lit in the West are *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *Sex and the City*. Chick lit is an upcoming genre in Indian writing in English.

Romance and chick lit mark out a women-only zone that is upper-class and chic and qualitatively different from the kind of women writing that, say, Tharu and Lalitha excavated and compiled in their path breaking volumes or Alice Walker traced and discussed in her essay. The political value of

these genres is not obvious and a lot of critics dismiss them as escapism. However, some feminist critics argue that by marking out a zone that is exclusively for women these highly commercialised genres do create some space for women's concerns. A very persuasive case, for instance, was made by the feminist critic Janice A. Radway who discussed popular romance as a way for many middle-class and middle-aged women readers to come to terms with the neglect and violence they suffered at the hands of their male partners. Thus, even though the romantic heroes of popular romances may seem like stereotypes of 'manly' men, the very act of reading the romance was for many women readers 'a declaration of independence'. Many romances, Radway points out, are premised on the magical transformation of the hero from an uncaring brute to a tender partner due to 'true love' (Radway, 1984, p.148). The structure of the romance functions, according to Radway, as a "utopian wish-fulfillment fantasy," a dream-world that offers substitute satisfactions that make the woman feel worthy and alive (Radway, 1984, p. 151).

A lot of commercial fiction that is deemed reactionary may, thus, be read in liberatory ways by prioritizing the use readers are making of it over the intention of its producers who operate in a cynical, profit-oriented market.

2.8 LET US SUM UP

Theoretical interventions in the late twentieth century have problematised the role of the author and laid the foundation to reconceptualise writing, emphasizing the reader as an active producer of meaning. This has led to a shift in feminist scholarship from women's writing to a far more nuanced interpretation of both the terms: 'women' and 'writing'. However, the value of early feminist work that comprised excavating women's writing that had been forgotten or overlooked cannot be undermined as societies still remain sexist. The term woman writer is simultaneously liberating and constricting today. On the one hand, we need to foreground women's writing as various institutions like state, family and the nation conspire to contain its radical potential and render it toothless by overt and covert censorship; on the other hand, we must ensure that the nomenclature 'woman writer' doesn't work to further marginalize women's creativity. The agenda is a difficult one and is not made less so by the centrality the market has come to occupy in the contemporary literary establishment. The market prioritizes a regressive femininity foregrounding women's conventional roles. However, seductions of highly commercialised women-only genres may be counteracted by the liberatory use women readers make of them. Thus, women's writing is crucial in recreating and challenging gender stereotypes and remains a continuing engagement for feminists of all kinds.

2.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Discuss the relationship between the author and the notion of 'authority' in the realm of literature, as used by Ronald Barthes.
- 2) Evaluate the concept of woman as a writer in the literary world.
- 3) Justify the acceptance of and/or resistance to the label 'woman writer' by woman themselves.
- 4) How does the market impact of role of gender in literature?

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2.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 3 CRITICAL APPROACHES

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Structure

- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Objectives
- 3.3 Background
- 3.4 Critical Approaches to Literature and Gender
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3.1 INTRODUCTION

By now, you would have a good idea of the relevance and significance of gender studies, what constitutes gender and how gender is implicated in, and contributes to, constructing different categories and systems of knowledge. Gender does not just provide the lens or filter through which we view and make sense of the world, but becomes the dominant lens through which we create reality and the world. It becomes in effect a medium through which every event is experienced and experience is constituted.

Feminist movements, right from their inception, have considered literature a very important category for understanding how notions of gender are shaped in culture and society. Moreover gender roles and attributes in any cultural context are moulded by literature and imaginative writing, and other cultural productions. At least two perceptions flow from this, first, literature, along with other cultural productions can help bring about a change in how gender is viewed; and second, changes in how gender is constructed and perceived will result in a transformation of the spaces occupied by literature.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss critical approaches to literature;
- Describe the relationship between gender, reading and interpreting;

- Explain different models of difference in the context of literary criticism; and
- Describe various post-structuralist theories in relation to reading, writing and criticism from a gendered perspective.

3.3 BACKGROUND

Critical approaches to gender and literature are shaped by ways of reading, interpreting and writing which are culturally encoded. Language is both a social practice and a very powerful instrument through which we represent and construct reality. Mediating between language and reality is ideology, which in its turn is central to the cultural production of gender (Belsey, 1980, p. 4-5). It is our ideology which makes us analyze a book or a film in a particular way. Ideology can be defined as a set of ideas and assumptions, unconsciously held, through which we view the world and make sense of it. For example, while you might hear of communist or patriarchal ideology, there is often a distinction between the two. The former group is probably conscious about the set of political ideas it subscribes to; the latter group, of people subscribing to patriarchal ideology, accept male domination in a social formation as natural and inevitable and as the only way society can be organized.

The role of critical approaches to gender is to reveal how patriarchal ideologies -the idea of male domination and female subordination as natural, ahistorical and non-negotiable- have shaped both notions of the literary as well as the cultural representations of gender in literary and critical texts. Further the task of criticism is to suggest a transformative critical practice, and some radical theorizing in the last couple of decades has suggested the directions such a critical practice might take.

In the next section, we will briefly summarize some of the broad trends in the study of gender and literature as it was conceptualized by the concerns of what is historically known as first and second wave feminism. Critical formulations on literature and gender proliferate before the 1970s, but came into collective critical consciousness around 1970. The issues raised in this period were subjected to revision and reinterpretation by the mid-1980s leading to insights and interpretations that have come under the rubric of third wave or difference feminism.

3.4 CRITICAL APPROACHES TO LITERATURE AND GENDER

“I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is”, remarked the well known author, Rebecca West, “I only know that other people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate

me from a doormat or prostitute” (Guerin, 2005, p. 222). Feminism involves a crucial set of distinctions between the terms ‘feminist’ (a political position), ‘female’ (matter of biology) and ‘feminine’ (set of culturally defined characteristics’ (Moi, 2001, p. 266). The complex and crucial negotiations between these terms, especially the relationship between the biological (therefore natural) and the cultural raises questions of socialisation and conditioning and is an important area of discussion in gender studies. Feminism/s, it is now widely accepted, include/s more than a single set of approaches, assumptions and definitions and has gone far beyond being a theory propounded by white heterosexual women to express resistance to patriarchy. Further the term ‘feminism’ is increasingly referred to as gender studies, which is often the preferred term in critical discourse as it reflects the focus on the construction and formation of gender and sexualities across cultures.

While women the world over have written with varying degrees of success over many centuries, their work has invariably been marginalized, misrepresented and misjudged in such a way so as to make ‘great’ literature the exclusive preserve of men. Women, in this scheme of things, have always been relegated to secondary status and their efforts made to seem inferior to those of men. These issues are raised by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) and dealt with extensively by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949). The latter anticipates most of the concerns of second-wave feminism and discusses the othering of women in history and culture. You would have come across these terms in earlier units. By the late sixties and early seventies feminist concerns were voiced in varying discursive registers. A major feminist preoccupation in the 1970s was the exposure of the dynamic and mechanisms of patriarchy. The question of lost female traditions of writing was discussed by Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing*, where she outlines three stages or phases of women’s writing: feminine, feminist and female. In the phases that Showalter identifies, the feminine phase(1840-1880) denotes a phase when women writers imitated the dominant male traditions and ways of writing(note the use of masculine pseudonyms for example, George Eliot), the feminist phase(1880-1920) includes writers who carried out an active advocacy for women’s rights, like Olive Schreiner and the female phase (1920 onwards) when women writers come into their own, freed from the dependency of opposition and experience a sense of autonomy (Showalter, 1977, Introduction).

We can use Showalter’s outline to indicate a concomitant development in the critical apparatus developed and deployed by feminist critics. In the first phase of their critical endeavour feminist critics like Kate Millett directed their attention to images and representations of women in classics of Anglo-American literature like the works of D.H. Lawrence, Norman

Mailer and Jean Genet. Focusing on biology and culture, Millett attacks and critiques capitalism, male power and authority and the sexualizing and gender stereotyping of women in texts by men. The kind of approach which critiques the stereotypical (and therefore pejorative) representation of women was used by critics to demonstrate the incidence of sexism and misogyny in genres like the great American novel and epic poetry, both western and non-western. Alongside this 'images of women' criticism, there developed a critique which highlighted the man-made nature of language and attributed women's discomfort to its inherent patriarchal bias. This argument led to further discussion on differing patterns of language -use between men and women and women's innovations in writing through "silence, euphemism and circumlocution" (Showalter, 1985, p.321). These are some of the strategies women have used to circumvent the problem of censorship which they had to face in other cultural contexts as well. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, in their archival research in 'Women Writing in India' (1991) highlight the neglect of certain classics of women's writing such as Muddupalani's 'Radhika Santwanam' since these writings were 'morally corrupt' and could not be assimilated into the ideological services literature was being pressed into (Tharu, Lalita, 1991, p. 9) by the social reformers and nation builders of nineteenth century India. The gendered identities that emerged in this context were identities that were produced by a variety of discourses and criss-crossed by narratives of social change, reform and nationalism. The archival research of feminist critics like Tharu and Lalita demonstrate that gender is a culturally constructed category that is formed at the interstices of ideas of culture, ideas about femininity (women's nature) and the nation - in - the - making (Tharu, Lalita, 1991, pp. 1-39).

The initial efforts of feminist critics led to the anthologizing of women's writings in several genres, which included slave narratives, personal memoirs, diaries, letters and autobiographies (e.g. *The Norton Anthology of Women's Writing/Poetry*). In the academic context there also emerged a substantial body of critical work that looked at questions of reading and interpretation as well as the anxieties of authorship that assailed the work of women writers. The pioneering classic published in 1979 by Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, studied both canonical and non-canonical works by women writers of the nineteenth century like Charlotte Bronte and Christina Rossetti, focusing on the deviant figures and relationships in literary texts as expressions of the anxieties of authorship and the authors' repressed rage and frustration. Gilbert and Gubar suggested that figures like that of Bertha Mason in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* function as a 'doppelganger' or 'dark double' to ventilate feelings of anger and helplessness experienced by women writers in a patriarchal society. Similarly, Showalter turned the spotlight on women writers in her account of 'gynocriticism' outlined in *The New Feminist Criticism* (1985) (Gilbert, Gubar, 1984, 359-362). Gynocriticism focused on the study of women as writers and on the "history, styles,

themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition” (Showalter, 1985, p.307). Women’s literature is an “imaginative continuum [of] certain patterns, themes, problems and images, from generation to generation” (Showalter, 1985, p. 11). She formulates analytical approaches to women’s writing by outlining four models of difference: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytical and cultural. In doing so, she covers a wide swathe of critical approaches to literature and gender.

The biological model conceptualized by Showalter is a summing up of the radical feminist position, which sees writing as produced by the female body and views ‘physicality as a resource’(Evans, 1985, p.127). The concept of “*l’écriture féminine*” put forward by the French feminists also sees writing as a product of the polymorphous plural sexualities sited on the female body (Irigaray, 1977, p.53). The body in a literal, metaphorical/figurative sense has also been invoked by both the radical as well as the French feminists. This model has been criticized by other schools of feminist criticism as crude, reductive and seeking to reduce the complexity of feminist thought to essences in its unquestioning adoption of biologism. Further this model is also problematic as the body and sex does not only belong to the realm of biology (and nature) as previously accepted, but is equally formed in and by culture. Moreover, the body and bodily difference is, according to recent theoretical insights, no longer a stable signifier, but is constructed at the interstices of sex, gender and culture. You have already read about the social construction of gender in Unit 1, Block 3, MWG 001. It may be helpful for you to review some of the ideas here.

Showalter’s linguistic model asserts the alienation of women trapped in “man-made language” which chokes and silences them. Countering sexism in language is not enough; women’s writing and criticism has to subvert this linguistic domination and appropriate the resources of language to express the inner realities and feelings of women. Tillie Olsen in *Silences* (1978) cites “mute inglorious Miltons whose working hours are all struggle for existence” which arise from being born “into the wrong class, race or sex, being denied education, becoming numbed by economic struggle, muzzled by censorship or distracted or impeded by the demands of nurturing” (Olsen, 2003, p.10). However, Olsen also says that silence can be posed as resistance to “the dominant discourse” such as Emily Dickinson’s “slant truths” and the inner dialogues of quiet characters such as Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre or Virginia Woolf’s Lily Briscoe (Guerin, 2005, p.225). Many critics have viewed language, its use and practice, as a site and marker of gender difference and have identified the use of associational rather than linear logic, free play of meaning and a lack of closure ,the preference for certain domestic ‘genres’ such as letters and diaries, with the feminine. The

challenge for feminists, is to reinvent language, to speak not only against, but “outside of the specular phallogocentric structure to establish the status of which would no longer be defined by the phallacy of masculine meaning” (Felman, 1975, p.3-10).

The psychoanalytic model locates difference in the psyche of the writer. Among the critics invoking the psychoanalytic model of difference are Gilbert and Gubar and French feminists like Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. These theorists modify the ideas of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan to explore and examine women’s writing and gender difference. You would have come across some of these ideas elsewhere as well, but particularly relevant are Freud’s ideas about repression and the unconscious, Lacan’s observations on the Imaginary and the Symbolic and his observation that the unconscious is structured like a language. From Kristeva comes the idea of the semiotic. In *Desire in Language* (1980) Kristeva propounds the idea of a maternal realm of the semiotic as a distinct realm from that of the symbolic. Echoing Lacan, she argues that the semiotic realm of the mother is present in and disrupts symbolic discourse as absence or contradiction. French feminists like Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray emphasize the importance of the corporeal and the maternal as the source of creativity. Hélène Cixous proposes the idea of utopia, a primeval space free of the symbolic order, law of the father, sex roles and otherness (Guerin, 2005, p.229). Irigaray links the word “matter” etymologically to “maternity”. Matter is irreducible to male conceptual rationality ...[it is]outside and making possible, yet impossible to assimilate to “male reason, matter is what makes women women, an identity and an experience of their own, forever apart from male power and male concepts (Irigaray,1985, p.529). By now you are quite familiar with this idea of psychoanalytical study for you have studied about this in MWG 001, Block V Unit 2, where the discussions were focussed mainly on theoretical aspects of feminism; you will further read about similar concepts in MWG004, Block IV, Unit 3.

The models of difference enumerated here (based on the biological, linguistic and psychoanalytical) hinge on essentialist arguments and have been critiqued by third wave or poststructuralist feminists. Broadly opposed to the essentialist model is the constructionist or constructivist model which stresses on the culturally constructed nature of gender attributes. Showalter’s cultural model for exploring difference is a particularly productive one and includes a broad spectrum of Marxist and socialist approaches to studying literature and gender. As Showalter points out a gynocentric criticism must “plot the precise locus of female literary identity and describe the forces that intersect a woman writer’s cultural field” (Showalter, 1985, p.324). These forces include locations of race, class, gender, socio-historical context. Gynocentric criticism would also attempt to situate women with respect to “variables of literary culture, such as modes of production and distribution, relations

of author and audience, relations of high art to popular art” (Showalter, 1985, p.324). As a matter of fact, cultural studies and cultural criticism have emerged as disciplines to study gender through the filter of culture. Additionally, historians like Gerda Lerner and Joan W. Scott explore the idea of a woman’s culture as the foundation for a revisionist, woman-centred enquiry of the past (Kelly, 1979, p.145-180).

The neglect of women’s writing and women’s culture is well documented by Tharu and Lalita in *Women Writing in India* (1991) who discuss prevalent cultures of writing, reading, interpretation in the context of the nationalist and reform movements of India. They foreground the narratives of writers who were hitherto hidden from history and, in the process, construct traditions of women’s writing. Interestingly Ambai’s story “Squirrel” gives a rich metonymic and reflexive account of the endeavours of the (presumably) female archivist and researcher who tries to recover women’s writings in a dusty musty library, where precious books lie in neglected dust heaps. Tharu and Lalita’s ground-breaking research also sketches the multiple contexts and the frames within which women’s writing should be read, interpreted and understood.

Check Your Progress 1:

Try to explain, in your own words, the linkage of feminine and female as portrayed in literature.

3.4.1 Ways of Reading and Interpreting

A critical approach to reading primarily involves an awareness of the politics of literature and literary interpretation, as Judith Fetterley declared, “Literature is political and its politics is male” (Fetterley 1978, Introduction). In *The Resisting Reader* she discusses the co-option of women readers who were encouraged to read, think and teach, in gender neutral ways. In much the same way, women readers were called forth to uncritically endorse the great classics of American literature which demonstrate a surprising element of misogyny. This element of misogyny is evident in the works of Mark Twain, Melville, Hemingway and Mailer. While Fetterley’s thesis echoes the

ideas put forward by Millett in *Sexual Politics*, Fetterley's focus is also on the politics and practice of reading.

A criticism which is sensitive to the political implications and institutional practices of canon-building would encourage a resistant reading, a reading against the grain of established critical tenets. This is particularly important since critical norms have been institutionalized by an academic establishment which is primarily male. The relationship between a phallogentric canon and androcentric modes of reading is a symbiotic one (Schweickart, 1986, p. 433). Reading habits, moreover, are taught and since literature is a social institution, "reading is a highly socialized-or learned- activity" what we choose to read-and teach and 'canonize', usually follows upon our previous reading (Kolodny, 1980, p. 20). Feminist critics who attempt to combine the insights of reader-response criticism to the ideological framework of feminist theory point to a dual critical praxis. As Schweickart elucidates, "the critique of androcentric reading practices is essential, for it opens up some ideological space for the recuperation of women's writing" (Schweickart, 1986, p.427). In other words the stance adopted by the feminist reader of the male text will be resisting and adversarial, while the stance vis-à-vis a woman-authored text would be recuperative. The purpose of a resistant reading is both to examine the subversions and resistance implicit in women's writing and develop reading strategies which resonate with feminist concerns and experiences. In this case the resistance is not to the text but to patriarchal misreadings and misinterpretations.

Another kind of criticism which focuses on reading is a type of genre criticism that explores the popularity of a particular genre or subgenre among a specific segment of readers. Examples of this kind of writing are the romance, a sub-genre or offshoot of which is the 'chick-lit' that is eagerly consumed by adolescent girls and women. In her essay on reading the romance, Janet Radway theorises that romance fiction / mode is something that women can escape into, that offers them a chance to create a fantasy far removed from the humdrum conditions of their actual life.

What feminist criticism does to reader response criticism is to politicize the interlocking categories of gender and interpretation and suggest strategies for a gendered theory of reading. Through altering ways of reading and interpretation, feminist theorists suggest, revisionist readings can be effected. Further the process of reading/studying women's writing would lead to a challenging of fundamental theoretical assumptions of traditional literary criticism (like periodisation) as well as of heteronormative (the heterosexual norm) ideas of sexual difference and gender.

3.4.2 The Question of Difference

By the 1980s, critical approaches to gender extended in scope and ambit and became more “eclectic” (Barry 1995, 2002, p.122). The boundaries between what was hitherto seen as ‘Literature’ (i.e. fictional writings) and ‘Critical Theory’ had become much more porous. The practice of literary criticism, far from declaring a work as autotelic (autonomous, with its own teleology) began to draw upon the insights of Marxism, Structuralism, Psychoanalysis and Linguistics. Literature was no longer confined to the specifically literary but drew within its ambit questions of representation and construction of gender within the field of culture. This paradigm shift became evident in popular and genre fiction, in the art of avant-garde artists who questioned earlier norms of representations (Andy Warhol) and in cultural critiques of practices like striptease (Barthes).

Feminist critical practices had a role to play in this epistemological shift which resulted in the opening up of the domain of literature to hitherto oppressed groups. Critiques like Michele Barrett’s *Women’s Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis* (1980) demonstrate the role of the ideological in the shaping of gender. Drawing on Althusser’s work on ideology, Barrett discusses the necessity of retaining the analytical category of woman, so as not to lose sight of histories of oppression. Her work seems to be informed by a sense of the nebulousness and fluidity of categories of woman, sex, gender and history in poststructuralist theory.

The hold of academia and other hegemonic groups (colonial powers, white educated males) got diluted with the emergence of a sophisticated Marxist criticism (along with other factors) which gave rise to contesting power groups and conflicting ideologies, so that the great traditions of a privileged category-‘Literature’-becomes a chorus of voices or ‘literatures’. The rise of non-white feminisms, multicultural feminisms in the western context and the rise of Dalit (oppressed, downtrodden groups) literature and feminisms in the Indian context led to the foregrounding of new issues and new debates on identity, subjectivity and the role of language and culture. One of the core issues that these debates hinge on is the issue of difference.

The concept of difference is defined by Julian Wolfreys as both “political and ontological,” that “which makes possible any meaning or identity” since it derives from the “political and ontological necessity of recognizing that different groupings (for example women, nonwhite and people of colour, gays and lesbians) not only differ from the white heterosexual norm, but also differ among themselves: women, for example, may be middle-class or working class, Black or Asian, straight or gay or bi, and/or any combination of any set of attributes” (Wolfreys, 2004, p.58). Thus, although many nonwhite theorists include “each other in shared analyses of oppression, and while most feminisms have aligned themselves with arguments against

racism, xenophobia, and homophobia,” (Guerin, et al, 2005, p.2-3) there is a strong protest against homogenization of any kind. The issue of difference is a complex one since each minority group has its own issues and concerns, which, they argue, cannot be collapsed with those of others. The case of black feminists or ‘womanists’ can be furnished as an example of a differential framework. The use of the term womanist distinguishes feminists of colour; and the term was used by the writer Alice Walker to indicate a kind of feminism that does not always necessarily turn its back on the men of the same community.

Black feminists declare that their multiple oppressions put them in a different category to both white women as well as black men. They also feel that their interests and urgencies can be represented only by them. They draw on both essentialist and constructivist notions—so while they accept and celebrate their ethnic difference they simultaneously feel that “blackness” is culturally constructed as a sign of otherness in Anglo-American culture. The rich prose of writers like Alice Walker, Adrienne Rich and Maya Angelou also raises questions about their exclusion from the canon of American literature, or their half-hearted exclusion as a kind of tokenism. The interrogation of the canon by black women writers has led to the recovery and foregrounding of genres like autobiographies, slave and captivity narratives. Rich also talks about the “lesbian continuum” which is both about resisting heterosexuality and its politics (heteronormativity) and about the “woman-identified woman”. Feminists like Walker offer a counter-discourse to patriarchy by restoring a sense of the value of the maternal heritage in works like *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1983), *The Colour Purple* (1982) and critics like Barbara Smith formulate an alternative aesthetic in *Towards A Black Feminist Criticism* (1977). In her work, Smith suggested a lesbian reading of Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (1973) and of earlier works by American women authors.

The critical work of black women theorists aimed to deconstruct stereotypes of lesbians as unnatural and sexless, and to redeem a hitherto neglected tradition of lesbian thought and writing (Habib, 2008, p.139). They saw lesbianism as the purest form of feminism since it asserted female autonomy and refused all forms of complicity with all forms of masculinist exploitation (Habib, 2008, p.139). The lesbian feminist poet and theorist Adrienne Rich saw lesbianism as a kind of “archetypal image” of the broad feminist agenda, and pressed for a dissociation of lesbian from male gay allegiances. Her powerful essay entitled “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980) talks of the “lesbian continuum” to indicate a range of experiences between women, including political support, bonding against male tyranny, and sharing a rich inner life (Habib, 2008, p.139).

The idea of a separatist lesbianism has also been advocated by Gloria Anzaldua in *Borderlands-La Frontera* (1987) by Monique Wittig in *The Lesbian Body* (1973) and Luce Irigaray's *The Sex Which Is Not One*, published in 1985. Anzaldua's work has opened up radically new ways of thinking about identity, experience and intersectionality. Mainstream notions of gender and culture are interrogated as the marginal destabilizes the dominant paradigms.

New ways of looking at gender are also evident in the work of 'third-world' /postcolonial feminists like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who discuss the issues of difference and subalternity. Their theorizing offers a necessary corrective to the homogenizing tendency of Western feminism to appropriate counter discourses, which are showcased in a tokenist way. Spivak's theoretical work and readings of Mahashweta Devi's stories draw on the insights of feminism, Marxism and deconstruction to offer a powerful commentary on how gender is both formed and destabilized at the interstices of class, nation and colony. In "Draupadi" and "Breast-Giver", Spivak uses the central metonymy (where the body of the woman represents the colonized nation) to deconstruct and allegorize the interlocking and interwoven colonialisms of race, class and gender.

The politics of colonialism, race, caste and class as they configure and reconfigure gender in the Indian context has been well documented by scholars like Partha Chatterji (1989), Uma Chakravarti (1995) and Kumkum Sangari (1989). Their work presents more than one specific approach and draws on a variety of methodologies, which can be referred to as cultural studies. The development of cultural studies has proved to be particularly fruitful in formulating critical approaches to gender as it draws into its ambit the whole field of (cultural) representations. Adopting this approach, we can study a poem and place it alongside a film and/or an advertisement. For instance, a poem like "My Last Duchess" by the Victorian poet Robert Browning is the narrative of an arrogant, amoral duke who recounts the story of his marriage while gazing at the painting of his dead wife, the last duchess of the poem's title. The poem constantly calls our attention to the controlling nature of the male gaze which represents, objectifies and produces the dead woman in a such a way that she is reduced to an object. (It is an interesting piece of irony that the dead duchess comes alive-she exceeds the matrices of her representation). The male gaze has also been analyzed in relation to the paintings of nude female figures during the European Renaissance (Berger, 1972, p. 49-56), in relation to the question of the male gaze in film studies There is Laura Mulvey's pioneering work on the "male gaze" in the classic Hollywood film, according to which man is the bearer of the look, the voyeur and woman the image: "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance pleasure in looking has been split...the male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly"(Mulvey 1975, p.1-2). We observe the same phenomena in

advertisements which commodify the female body to sell everything from cars to bathroom fittings. You will read about male gaze in the next unit of this block in the context of deconstruction. Let us now look at related theories of post-structuralism in the context of gender.

Check Your Progress 2:

What is gynocentric criticism? How does literature interpret this criticism?

3.4.3 Post-structuralism and the Question of Gender

Along with cultural studies and related areas like gender and media studies, has come the poststructuralist challenge to questions of sex and gender, questions of representation and representability. Influenced by the works of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and other avant-garde theorists like Jacques Lacan and Jean Lyotard, poststructuralist theorists put forward the idea that identities are created in and through language and discourse. (You will read about Derrida's work in greater detail in the next and last unit of this block). Further there is no essence or core to gender and any ideas of an interior core of gender is an illusion and a fabrication to conceal the politics of its discursive origin (Habib 2008, p. 143). According to Judith Butler whose writings have had enormous influence on gender studies, the gendered body is performative; it has "no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (Butler, 1990, p.136). Citing the practices of drag artists who impersonate women, Butler observes that this behaviour frames and dramatizes the signifying gestures through which gender is produced. In deconstructing and radically destabilizing the category of woman, Butler points to the fluidity and social construction of gendered identities. Her thinking poses a challenge to any kind of essentialist feminism where the fixed and immutable category of woman is the starting point of inquiry and action: gender is produced by power structures and intersects with race, class, politics and culture (Butler, 1990, p.1-3). Using Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, Butler opines that there is no natural body prior to signification, the body is not a being but a surface which is the product of regimes of power and regulatory disciplines organised in such a way so as to produce a "fiction of heterosexual coherence" and fabricated unity

(Butler, 1990, p.338). Gender is, in this scheme, a stylized repetition of acts. Further, this characteristic of gender opens up “performative possibilities for gender configurations outside the restricting frame of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality” (Butler, 1990, p. 140).

The theoretical and political implication of Butler’s denaturalizing of gender and discussion of agency has proved empowering for lesbian and queer studies. In reinforcing the idea that gender is a cultural construct, Butler has problematised the contingent foundations of identities and subjectivities as well. Her theorizing has catalyzed certain debates between different groups of feminist theorists, about the problem of the subject. On the one hand is the radical “poststructuralist subject, with its commitment to a nameless and open-ended process” and, on the other, lie the exigencies of feminist politics which “requires the determinate authority of names, identities and constituencies” (Radhakrishnan, 1996, p. 22). Though Butler believes that “a new configuration of politics” (Butler, 1990, p. 140) would emerge and subversive repetition would displace the normativity of gender, the chasm between poststructuralism and the more historically informed theories seems unbridgeable.

The divide between the abstract subject of poststructuralist epistemology and the material subject of feminist theories committed to emancipation (Marxist and Socialist feminism) is evident in third-wave postmodernist feminism as well. Postmodernism positions itself against grand narratives, totalising and universal theories and proclaims the death of the subject. The implications of the postmodern critique for identity politics was seen as damaging for feminist theory and the two were viewed as theoretically incompatible (Flax 1990, Benhabib 1992). One way out of this theoretical impasse was suggested by Spivak who advocated a “strategic essentialism”(Spivak, 1987). Another way suggested by Benhabib is to reconcile feminism and postmodernism by salvaging a diluted ‘weak’ version of postmodernism, which does not declare the death of the subject but studies the contingent, historically changing radical situatedness and conceptualization of the subject. Gender and the various practices contributing to its constitution are one of the most “crucial contexts in which to situate the purportedly neutral and universal subject of reason” (Benhabib, 1992, p. 78).

Gender Studies also focuses attention on the construction of masculinities in different cultural and socio-historical contexts. Works like *Between Men* (1985) and *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick focus attention on male homosocial desire. You have already read about these in Block 6 of MWG 001.

3.5 LET US SUM UP

Gender studies provides a cogent critique of patriarchal world views and knowledge systems. It offers a radical critique of the power-knowledge nexus which permeates our society and exposes the politics of gender constructions. It examines the oppressive history of groups with alternate or differently constructed sexualities, the formation and representation of gender, “gender as a category of analysis of literature and culture and the intersection of gender with divisions of race, class and colour” (Habib, 2008, p.137). Finally it also shows us that gender is the product of extensive negotiations with ideologies of normative and alternate-sexuality.

Many literary writings in the last few decades refract and reconfigure this new concept of the fluidity and constructedness of gender. Novels like Hari Kunzru’s *The Impressionist*, poems like “Highway Stripper” (1986) by A.K.Ramanujan show the melting and dissolution of gender identities and also illustrate the performative aspect of gender. Similarly the use of literary techniques like pastiche and fragmentation suggest the discontinuities and fracturing of (ostensibly) seamless and coherent narrativisations of gender identities.

3.6 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Discuss the contrast between the essentialist and constructivist views of gender, giving at least two features of each.
- 2) What are the four models of difference according to Showalter in *The New Feminist Criticism*?
- 3) Discuss Judith Butler’s ideas on gender and performance. How do these ideas radically destabilize the category of gender?
- 4) How is feminist criticism different from gender studies?

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UNIT 4 FEMINISM AND DECONSTRUCTION

Anu Aneja

Structure

- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Objectives
- 4.3 Locating Deconstruction in Literary Theory
 - 4.3.1 Structuralism
 - 4.3.1.1 From New Criticism to Structuralism
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 - 4.3.1.3 Structuralism as Literary Theory
 - 4.3.2 Post Structuralism and Deconstruction
 - 4.3.2.1 Roland Barthes
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- 4.4 Deconstruction and Feminism
 - 4.4.1 Alignments
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- 4.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.6 Unit End Questions
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- 4.8 Suggested Readings

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous units of this block, you learnt how to critically analyze literary texts through a gendered lens. These units introduced you to alternative ways of reading, writing and criticism from feminist perspectives. Now that you have observed that there are various possible approaches to reading and appreciating literature, we will examine one particular approach which has been of utmost significance to feminist theorists in the last century. In this unit, you will read about the relations between feminism and deconstruction, and how feminists have been able to employ deconstructive strategies to advantage. We will begin by locating deconstruction within its historical literary context, and examine other movements, more specifically, Structuralism and Post-Structuralism, with which it is related. We will then try to explain the salient aspects of deconstruction and its relevance to feminism.

4.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- Understand the origin and place of deconstruction within the historical and literary context of the west;
- Speak knowledgeably about Structuralism and Post-Structuralism as literary movements;
- Explain how deconstruction works and what it attempts to do;
- Explain the role of deconstructionist theorists, especially Jacques Derrida;
- Distinguish between the use of deconstruction in France and by Anglo-Americans;
- Understand the alignments between feminism and deconstruction in the west and in the third world;
- Explain the limitations of deconstruction as well as the contradictions between feminism and deconstruction; and
- Discuss the relevance of deconstruction from the point of view of feminism in India.

4.3 LOCATING DECONSTRUCTION IN LITERARY THEORY

You may have already come across the term “deconstruction” or the verb “to deconstruct” in everyday language, as it has now become quite common to speak about deconstructing a film, a novel, or even someone’s words! But where did the term “deconstruction” (which is a relatively new addition to the English language) come from? In literary theory and criticism, the term deconstruction refers to a method of opening up and dismantling the obvious meanings of a text in order to reveal hidden meanings and interpretations. These meanings may be easily missed on a cursory reading of a text as they may have been marginalized for various reasons which we will soon look at. A text whose various meanings have been deconstructed can then be put back together, or reconstructed, allowing for a fuller and more meaningful interpretation of the text, as well as of various factors which may be part of its context. However, in order to fully comprehend the place and significance of deconstruction, we would need to locate it in the context of literary theory and criticism, and to see it in relation to other literary movements. Deconstruction and Post Structuralism, often used interchangeably, actually refer to a methodology and a contemporaneous literary movement. Post Structuralism, as a movement, became popular during the period we now identify as postmodern, which roughly follows the

Modern period. The postmodern period is used to describe social and economic conditions after modernity, and is said to have emerged somewhere around the late 20th century. Many of the effects of postmodern cultural conditions get reflected in literary theory, especially in Post Structuralism. Before we attempt to comprehend the scope of Post Structuralism as a literary theory, we need to examine the movement which immediately precedes it. Let us therefore begin by looking at Structuralism.

4.3.1 Structuralism

4.3.1.1 From New Criticism to Structuralism

Up until the early part of the twentieth century, the most common way of reading a text was to treat the text as a closed, organic whole and to assume that any meaning to be derived from this text was already present within it, and could easily be identified if one was trained in the method of literary interpretation. For example, a teacher using a poem in a literature classroom may first introduce students to basic literary tropes such as images, symbols, metaphors and metonymy, as well as linguistic tools such as meter, rhyme and rhythm, which are commonly used by poets. Once the students are equipped with these tools of interpretation, the class might collectively attempt to unravel the various features of the poem, comment on the poet's use of images and symbols, and try to produce a common understanding of the poem's intended meanings. Perhaps you have attended a similar class yourself in school or in college, as the method is still quite commonly used to teach literature. This perspective which looks at a poem (or any literary text), as an organic whole which contains pre-determined meanings waiting to be unraveled by the astute, competent reader is part of the movement called "New Criticism." Let us first try to understand the main aspects of this movement.

Perhaps disillusioned by the harsh economic and social realities imposed by the two wars in the first half of the twentieth century, the New Critics embraced literature and poetry as alternate sources of solace. The text became the locus of pleasure, and myth and poetry were especially favoured genres. The New Critics firmly believed that any work of literature was an autonomous entity and held all its possible interpretations within itself. It was up to the trained, competent reader to be able to find these meanings, and appreciate the literary techniques used by the poet. The New Critics, therefore, centered the role of the text, (and to a lesser extent, the poet/writer who puts the meanings into the poem), in literary activity. In England, critics like I.A Richards focused on 'Practical Criticism,' while in the 1930's to 1950's, American New Critics like John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, T.S. Eliot, Northrop Frye and Cleanth Brooks published books which charted out the realm and processes by which any literary text could be read. They thus assumed a universalism in literary texts, as it was presupposed that once

you have mastered a set of common tools for reading, you can unravel the meanings of any text placed before you. Although it may not have been obvious at the time, it soon became quite apparent that the ‘competent reader’ that the New Critics spoke about, was not just an average person on the street. Such a reader (usually male), had to have obtained his education in elitist western institutions (which implied he was usually a white upper-class male), as the literary training which was assumed to be possessed would normally be provided only at such institutions. The ‘objectivity’ and ‘universality’ of interpretations that New Criticism upheld was in fact exposed as a right wing, elitist western privilege possessed by those few who were fortunate enough to be born into a life of tradition and breeding. (This may ring true for you in the Indian context, too, where a familiarity with the English language, and English literary discourse, has for long been equated with a certain upper-class status which many hope to aim for.) Moreover, the absence of the role of any kind of context (cultural, gendered, racial, historical, etc.) in literary interpretation, soon made readers question the mastery of the New Critical perspective, and drew attention to its inherent limitations. By the middle of the twentieth century, in the background of anti-imperialist sentiments, independence movements in the third world, postcolonial consciousness, and rising socialist and feminist movements, New Criticism began to lose its traditional hold on the literature classroom.

4.3.1.2 Structuralism in Linguistics

At the same time, in the field of linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist had introduced some radical concepts in his theory of language study with the publication of his lecture notes under the title *Course in General Linguistics*, in 1916 (originally published in French). Saussure was a pioneer in linguistics, and was the first one to introduce the idea of signs as being made up of dual components - signifiers and signifieds. Let us look at what these terms mean. Quite simply put, any sign refers to a concept or an idea which we intend to represent. We use signifiers to represent these concepts (signifieds). For instance, we can use the signifiers ‘book,’ ‘kitab,’ ‘pustak,’ or ‘livre’ to refer to an identical concept, depending on which language we are using (English, Urdu, Hindi or French). The word with which we represent the intended meaning is the ‘signifier’ and the idea represented is the ‘signified.’ Saussure therefore showed that signs do not have essences (the signifier does not contain meaning but points towards it), and that they are defined by a network of relations (relations between signifiers and signifieds). We can produce and convey meaning because we belong to a common linguistic community, that is, because of certain shared conventions. These conventions are inherently arbitrary (there is no reason to call an orchid an orchid, we just do; however, if everyone using the English language agreed to call an orchid a tulip, the signifier would change, but the signified would remain the same, thus proving that there is no

natural connection between signifiers and signifieds.) By thus exposing the underlying structure of language, Saussure was able to show that:

- Meaning is the result of a system of shared conventions, and
- The relationships between signifiers and signifieds are arbitrary.

Additionally, Saussure showed that meaning is also the result of differences in phonemes. Linguists already spoke about language as consisting of minimal units of meaning ('morphemes') and minimal units of sounds ('phonemes'). For instance, we understand that the signifiers 'chair,' 'hair,' 'stair,' 'fair,' and 'mare' all refer to different signifieds but this observation is possible because there is at least one minimal phonemic (sound) difference between all of them. If we were to replace the /h/ phoneme in 'hair' with the /st/ phoneme, it would become impossible to distinguish the meanings between 'hair' and 'stair'. This idea of meaning arising from minimal differences between any two sound units forms the crux of the theory of structuralist linguistics. The two opposing elements which are different in any pair of signifiers, and thus endow them with different meanings, are called binary oppositions. From this, it was then not hard to extrapolate that binary oppositions form the fundamental operations in the production and communication of meaning between humans. From language, this method of studying signs and sign systems came to be applied in various fields and disciplines, including literature, mythology, anthropology, art and architecture. The study of signs and sign systems came to be referred to as Semiology (from 'semiotics' meaning 'study of signs'). Now that you have seen the significance of Structuralism in linguistics, let us turn to literature and see the how Structuralism developed into a literary theory.

4.3.1.3 Structuralism as Literary Theory

In literature, the implications of the structuralist approach were far reaching. Saussure's emphasis on relationships rather than essences had pointed to the significance of looking for meanings in terms of the former. Firstly, it was soon realized that a text's meanings could not be created except in relation to other texts and conventions of reading. A reader brings with her/himself layers of past reading experiences which will come into play; similarly, writers and poets are influenced by works that they have read and these will be reflected in, and become part of the meanings of their own works. A literary text may refer to another work (inter-textuality), or to conventions of reading from another time or culture. All of these relationships between the text and meanings outside the text will determine the various meanings made available by the text. By taking on these types of activities, structuralist theorists like Jonathan Culler were able to de-center both the text and the human subject in the process of meaning creation. Meaning was neither entirely inside the text (no longer an organic, autonomous whole), nor was it entirely created by the human reader who could not be

the sole originator of a poem's meaning. The primary task of the structuralist critic was to make explicit the underlying 'system' which makes meaning and interpretation possible. The goal of structuralist theory was to uncover meanings by drawing attention to the system of conventions used for the creation of meanings. The 'literary competence' that the New Critics had referred to was now no longer just a question of attending a prestigious school and being well-trained in literary methods, but also being trained in assimilated systems of conventions. Obviously, since no one could possibly be trained in all such systems, the ideal reader was more of a theoretical construct used to prove a point, rather than a real person lounging in an armchair and deriving maximum pleasure from a book because she was better prepared than her neighbours to do so.

While conventions enable the reader to invent meaning, they simultaneously place limits on meaning. Moreover, old conventions are bound to be replaced by new ones. Within this larger structure of conventions, the human being could fabricate meaning as long as the conventions were recognized and used in appropriate ways. In France, structuralist theorists like Roland Barthes successfully worked on revealing the basic relativity of thought and meaning, an idea originally introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure in his study of language, as you have seen above. This relativity of meaning becomes the touchstone of structuralist theory. Because structuralism focuses so much on conventions or codes by which humans are able to uncover meanings, it tends towards becoming a sort of master code itself, relying heavily on scientific rigour and abstraction. It is a highly analytical discourse which attempts to demystify literature by showing that everything in a text is based on a structure, and therefore, constructed. This impulse towards scientific rigour was perhaps propelled by a general feeling of competitiveness between literature and other disciplines (in the age of industrialism, poetry had come to be seen as an aesthetic pastime of not much real value when compared to the sciences). Structuralists, in their ardent desire to redeem literature's privileged status, went out of their way to prove the scientific basis and analytical precision that went into meaning creation. This led to Structuralist theory being associated with esoteric systems as the systems themselves became the new subject. By establishing the primacy of systems, structuralism tended towards becoming a meta-language (a discourse about another discourse), and structuralist theorists came to form a scientific elite of their own.

Because of this over-dependence on systems of rules, rather than on the human subject (who is decentered by structuralism), the theory has been criticized as being anti-humanist - meaning does not originate in the human being, but rather is created through systems of shared conventions. Structuralism's limitations are also noted by those critics who observe that the theory assumes an ideal reader who is free of social, cultural, and class

values, neither male nor female. That the idea of literary competence may depend on culture, gender, race, ideology, or other factors, seems to be ignored by Structuralism. If the New Critics, coming in the aftermath of the wars, economic depression and loss of faith in religion, tried to look for spiritual joy in poetry, the structuralists attempted to find their religion in scientific methods and abstractions. In the next section, we will see how these criticisms led to the move away from Structuralism and towards Post Structuralism.

Check Your Progress 1:

Try to explain, in your own words, the arbitrary links between signifieds and signifiers as proposed by Saussure. What is the relevance of his theory of structuralism in the context of literature?

4.3.1 Post Structuralism and Deconstruction

4.3.2.1 Roland Barthes: From Structuralism to Post Structuralism

The limitations and criticisms of Structuralism as noted above, soon gave way to a general dissatisfaction with the methods employed by structuralist theorists. The work of one such French theorist, Roland Barthes reflects this gradual shift from the over-dependence on systems and rules towards a much more playful and pleasurable attitude in literary criticism. Barthes, who started out as a structuralist theorist himself in his early career (with the publication of *S/Z* in 1970), soon drifted away towards a more aesthetic discourse which leans heavily on notions of subversive pleasure and eroticism derived from language and literature (*Writing Degree Zero*, 1972; *Pleasure of the Text*, 1973). In his work *Le Plaisir du Texte* (*Pleasure of the Text*), Barthes distinguishes between what he calls ‘readerly’ and ‘writerly texts.’ While a ‘readerly’ text poses as one which is replete with meanings and makes no demand on the reader but to consume these pre-determined meanings, a ‘writerly’ text invites readers not just to be consumers, but to be producers of the text, by ‘writing’ meaning as they read (Barthes, 1973, p. 6-7). Modern texts, in particular, Barthes declared, were more ‘writerly’ in nature as they deliberately opened themselves up to incision, participation and pleasure in the process of meaning-making. Further, Barthes distinguishes between the pleasure which we derive from the anecdotal level of a text, and that other pleasure or bliss (*‘jouissance’*), which is availed in the

interstices of writerly texts. (Barthes, 1973, p. 14-19) For Roland Barthes, therefore, the text is like a tissue of signifiers into which both writer and reader weave their meanings. The writer is not behind the text, but in its midst, and desire is born out of the mingling of the writer's and reader's pleasures. (Barthes, 1973, p. 64) By thus emphasizing the role of the signifier in creating the pleasure of reading and writing, Barthes shifted attention away from the realm of overarching meanings - whether in the form of truth, morality or ideology.

In the next section we will look at how some of these ideas introduced by Roland Barthes influenced other Post Structuralists. More specifically, we will examine the main ideas of one of the most well-known of these philosophers and theorists, Jacques Derrida.

4.3.1.2 Jacques Derrida: Deconstruction

If Saussure had shown that meaning is the result of differences between any two opposing minimal units of sounds, or phonemes (binary oppositions), poststructuralists went a step further to expand this idea. Drawing inspiration from Saussurian structuralist linguistics, they showed that meaning is not just the result of a difference between two binary oppositions but rather the result of an endless play of signifiers. For example, the signifier 'groan' differs from 'moan' because of one phonemic difference between the two. But we recognize the meaning of 'groan' not only because of this singular difference, but because it is also different from many other similar signifiers such as 'tone,' 'phone,' 'hone,' 'bone,' 'cone,' and 'zone.' Further, if we were to look up the meaning of 'groan' in a dictionary, we will get a series of new signifiers, (such as 'a complaining sound'), but the precise meaning of the signifier 'groan' will not be fully present in any of these new signifiers. We could then look up the meaning of all subsequent signifiers (such as 'complaining' and 'sound') but we would be continuously led to other signifiers whose meanings are never fully 'present' in the signifier. This very simple observation led poststructuralists to conclude that:

- Meaning is the result of an infinite series of differences;
- Meaning is never fully present in a sign; and
- Meaning is perpetually deferred.

The infinite play of differences, which leads to the postponement or deferral of meaning, and causes meaning to never be fully present, was termed "*différance*" (difference + deferral, and spelt with an 'a' as opposed to "*différence*" which means 'difference') by Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher, literary theorist and the exponent of most of the ideas mentioned above. (Derrida, 1968, "La Différance")

In literary discourse, poststructuralist theory showed that because of '*différance*,' meanings can only be based on a plurality of interpretations, all of which are subjective. While poststructuralists were not keen on denying the legitimacy of any one interpretation, their objective was to show that any interpretation is just that - subjective, incomplete and to some extent, arbitrary. In so doing they were thus able to liberate the text from any one dominating idea or truth (master discourse). Instead, the tendency was to show various interpretations as equally valid, leading to pleasure in play, subjectivity, and plurality of interpretations.

These ideas were then also applied to the study of cultural, anthropological and philosophical texts to show that meaning is always in some sense, absent, and that the stable 'truth' proposed by such texts can be shown to be resting on slippery ground (meaning slips from one signifier to another and all we get are brief, glimmerings of meaning but never complete or stable truths). Jacques Derrida coined the term "deconstruction" to refer to the literary operation of locating the hidden binary oppositions within any text, undermining the apparent meaning of a text through the dismantling of these binary oppositions, and exposing the temporary, relative, arbitrary and impermanent nature of the supposed 'true meanings' of the text. Because of the relative nature of meaning, we can never be entirely certain of the stable truth, or 'essence' of any text. This radical observation, as you may have noted by now, struck a lethal blow to the very idea of the elevated position accorded to canonical books, traditional philosophies, social systems or religions. In continuation of the work of Structuralist philosophers like Roland Barthes, the "metaphysics of presence" is thus interrogated by Derrida and exposed as being based not on absolute truths, but rather on constructed meanings. If no permanent, transcendental truth is possible, it was asked, can we then continue to hold in high esteem any truth or idea?

Moreover, Jacques Derrida was interested in showing how the very basic concept of binary oppositions, as used in linguistics, is itself not an innocent idea. In any text, knowledge system or traditional philosophy, truths are based on unequal binary oppositions. That is to say that while one meaning is centered and privileged, its opposite meaning is marginalized and devalued. For instance, the signifier 'first world' gains its meaning and privilege in our combined cultural consciousness because of its difference from the signifier 'third world.' Similarly, 'light' is opposed to 'dark,' 'day' to 'night,' 'north,' to 'south,' 'God' to 'devil,' and 'man' to 'woman.' You would have noticed, as did Derrida, that in all of these binary oppositions, one term is usually privileged over the other, or that one term is seen as the positive side of its negative. The meaning of the positive, however, is derived only because an opposite, or negative side, exists. Binary oppositions are therefore hierarchized where one meaning or 'truth' is privileged over another. The

deconstructionists showed, however, that there is nothing natural about these hierarchical arrangements, and that they are arbitrary. The reason for the unequal positions accorded to opposing concepts in culture is rather linked to power hierarchies in culture which get reflected in meanings which pose as ultimate truths. That which is privileged comes to occupy a position of 'hegemony' over its 'other,' but also derives its meaning from its difference from the other. The privileged meaning is centered while its opposite, or 'other' is pushed to the margins (see, especially, Derrida, 1978, "Structure, Sign and Play"). Privileged truths come to occupy positions of 'transcendental signifiers' whose authority is sustained because of concealed and unequal power relationships. Derrida revealed that western discourse is based on the transcendental truths of some signifiers, such as 'God' or 'author,' or 'man', and is therefore 'logocentric' (centered on privileged words; logos = word). These words are privileged because culture and history have arbitrarily accorded them their privileges, and thus include signifiers like 'man,' 'west' and 'phallus.' Derrida exposed much of western literary, philosophical and cultural discourse to be based on such logocentric and phallogocentric (privileging of the phallus as the transcendental signifier) tendencies. In exposing the inter-play of binary oppositions, Derrida was able to expose the presumed authority of dominant ideas and ideologies in the western tradition.

Jacques Derrida thus brought about trenchant critiques of entire philosophical traditions, and cultural systems based on the critical philosophy of deconstruction. As you may have surmised by now, such a lethal blow did not go unopposed. Critics of deconstruction were quick to point out that the operation and theoretical perspectives embraced by deconstruction might easily lead to a complete dissolution of all meaning, leading to possible chaos and lack of faith in any ideology. If we can undermine and deconstruct all meaning, does not this lead to an infinite and bottomless journey without end and without any meaning whatsoever? Such fears were moreover sustained by the work of the Anglo-American group of deconstructionists, which included Harold Bloom, J. Hillis Miller and Paul de Man. The work of these theorists tended towards pushing post structuralist assumptions to their extreme limits, whereby all meaning was exposed as unstable, and arbitrary, fueling fears of anarchy, nihilism and despair.

However, in defence of deconstructionists, especially those in France, the work of theorists like Jacques Derrida tended to be more of a political practice aimed at undermining and exposing the undue authority and power of certain ideologies and groups. Derrida's aim was not to reduce the text to nothing, but rather to show that the meanings pushed to the margins of a text (or system) had the capacity of undermining and overthrowing the hegemonic forces placed at the centre. As you may already have noticed from the above, deconstructive moves would hold a particular attraction

for those interested in achieving feminist goals. Let us now turn to the relationships between deconstruction and feminism to examine the proximity between them, and the nature of these relationships.

Check Your Progress 2:

Taking the example of any novel you have read or movie you have recently seen, try to describe the dominant meanings of the plot. Then deconstruct these meanings by looking for supplementary ideas that may be concealed at the margins and that may end up undermining the dominant themes.

4.4 DECONSTRUCTION AND FEMINISM

4.4.1 Alignments

In several blocks and units of the course material you have already read in the first two courses, you have come across various feminist theories, praxes, socio-cultural objectives, and literary-cultural representations and ideologies. From all of the above, you may have summarized that one common agenda or goal of feminist theorists, critics and activists is to work towards a more equitable distribution of social status, cultural representations, economic wealth, and material resources between women and men. You have also read about feminist theories from the point of view of literature, psychoanalysis and postcolonialism in previous units, especially in the course MWG 001.

In literary and cultural discourse, feminist theorists and literary critics in the twentieth century worked towards revealing the marginalized voices of women writers in literary history, the marginalization of female characters and viewpoints, and the possibilities of alternate styles of reading, writing and criticism from gendered perspectives. You have read about some of these in the first three units of this block. As may be evident from your readings, one way of doing this was to perform a critique of patriarchal perspectives and ideologies as reflected in texts, authors' positions, and reading and interpretation methods. Such critiques often ended up divulging the arbitrariness with which patriarchal and male-centered perspectives became central and dominating motifs in literature, advertently or unwittingly

pushing the concerns and perspectives of women, and non-normative gendered identities to the margins. The desire to undo the damage done over the centuries to women's and non-normative viewpoints in the world of literature and culture was to find a natural ally in deconstructive methodologies, with which feminist perspectives had much in common. Deconstructive strategies provided some valuable tools for the feminist critique of hierarchical privileges and the dismantling of gendered binary oppositions which more than often ended up devaluing non patriarchal and non heterosexual positions and ways of thinking.

In his essay, "Discourse of Others," Craig Owens undertakes a particular incisive study of the relation between postmodernism (especially deconstruction) and feminism (Owens, 1998). Briefly, we may summarise the following issues highlighted by deconstruction which became particularly useful as strategic tools for feminist theorists:

- Loss of mastery of one dominant perspective and acknowledgement of plural perspectives;
- Undermining of the authority of the knowing (privileged male) subject by those at the margins;
- Exposing the tyranny of the law of the signifier by showing how it permits only certain representations while blocking others;
- Undermining and exposing logocentric and phallogocentric discourses where the 'other' (woman) is spoken for, but does not speak or represent herself;
- Encouraging a critique of hegemonic systems, especially patriarchy;
- De-centering the unitary, masculine subject and enabling voices at the margins to make themselves heard.

Check Your Progress 3:

Using the above bulleted points try to think of one example for each point in the context of a book or a film that you are familiar with, showing how a feminist perspective may have been used to achieve the desired result.

While the above aspects can be gainfully used in the reading and critique of literary texts, Owens' essay also shows how deconstructive strategies became equally important in the interpretation of works of visual art, especially photography. For instance, Martha Rosler and Cindy Sherman, two American postmodern photographers draw attention to a deliberate loss of mastery through the use of techniques which make the spectator critically aware of his or her gaze. Similarly, Barbara Kruger's images and collages emphasize the controlled objectivity with which we normally look at images and asks us to question our presumed objectivity.



Source: Google images

Kruger's images, as in the above photograph, often reflect the spectator's gaze back and away from the image. In this especially evocative image of a black and white profile of a little girl, the large letters saying "no" in red are placed in contrast to the image, and confront the male gaze with their decisive dissent. The mocking sign of the child, further adds to denial of a certain type of gaze, which the spectator immediately becomes aware of. Kruger's images deny domination by the viewer, bring into focus any concealed elements of voyeurism in the gaze, and force self-reflection.

In the next section, we will see how the element of mastery and domination, called into question by deconstruction, is employed to advantage by some postmodern feminist theorists.

French Feminism and Deconstruction

In France, among the most famous proponents of post-structuralist literary perspectives are the French feminists Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. You have already been introduced to their work in the unit on “Humanities” in the course MWG 001, and will be reading much more in detail about their work in the course MWG 004, in the unit on feminist psychoanalysis. Cixous, especially, worked closely with Jacques Derrida in practicing and developing strategies of writing which openly challenge conventional patriarchal and heteronormative patterns of writing. She employs deconstructive techniques to create a new kind of writing which has close associations with the female body (“*écrire le corps*” or “writing the body”). Deconstruction thus helps her not only to unveil the concealed phallogocentric desires and power play in traditional literary texts, but also to move beyond such writing to create a liberatory space for women’s voices and bodies. Cixous’ uses densely textured language and her texts tend to move away from the traditional teleological plots by exploring plural meanings. The characters, even though fictional, are often nameless and the stories told through them move backwards and forwards, inviting the reader to enter the text through multiple pathways. Cixous also draws attention to the richness of signifiers with a language replete with word-play and a sensuality reminiscent of bodily metaphors. In thus critiquing logocentric and phallogocentric discourses with their dependence on unilateral master narratives, Cixous employs deconstructive strategies to open up plural spaces from where women can voice themselves and be heard.

Similarly, Luce Irigaray employs the metaphor of the “two lips” in an attempt to undo the binary logic of phallogocentric discourse, and to explore a discourse through which femininity can be explored at the level of language. You have been introduced to French writers, Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva in earlier units in MWG 001, and we will learn more about their techniques in MWG 004. Their attempts to experiment with and create a “feminine discourse” while employing deconstructive strategies have invited both interest and criticism. Critics of French feminist discourse have pointed to an inherent danger in the endeavour of positing “femininity” as some kind of definable essence, as they fear that this will automatically lead to fixed stereotypes, a trap from which women have been struggling hard to escape for centuries. Thus, while deconstruction itself denies essence, by showing how all essences can be effectively undermined, it is paradoxical to note that feminine discourses inspired by deconstructive strategies may end up creating a discourse which itself risks becoming essentialised and fixed. We will look more closely at this conundrum through the work of American

feminist theorists later on in the section on 'Divergences'. Let us now turn our attention to African-American and Postcolonial feminists and see to what extent they have been influenced by deconstruction.

African-American & Postcolonial Feminists

Besides interrogating the unequal differences based on gender and sexuality, deconstructionists equally called into question hierarchies of race, class, ethnicity and sexuality based on which hegemonic positions were adopted by white, upper class male viewpoints. In the unit on Postcolonialism in MWG 001, you read about African American feminists like bell hooks and their work on bringing the plight of those at the margins into focus. You were also introduced to the ideas of third world feminist critics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who combines deconstructive strategies with a feminist Marxist perspective to speak about the subaltern.

In her widely read essay "Postmodern Blackness," bell hooks points to an inherent irony in postmodern discourse, which, while attempting to draw attention to those at the margins, fails to have any concrete effect due to its specialized theoretical language and lack of knowledge about the real, lived experiences of those at the margins: "It is sadly ironic that the contemporary discourse which talks the most about heterogeneity, the decentered subject, declaring breakthroughs that allow recognition of otherness, still directs its critical voice primarily to a specialized audience, one that shares a common language rooted in the very master narratives it claims to challenge. If radical postmodernist thinking is to have a transformative impact then a critical break with the notion of "authority" as "mastery over" must not simply be a rhetorical device, it must be reflected in habits of being, including styles of writing as well as chosen subject matter" (hooks, 1990). Thus, while recognizing the potential benefits and good intents of deconstruction as theory, African American feminists are quick to point out the amount of work that still needs to be done in terms of more concrete, substantial and effective representations of those marginalized by race or class. The concern of black feminists in this regard can be compared to the stand taken by certain postcolonial feminists doing similar work.

One such postcolonial theorist who is well-known not only for her brilliant translations of some of Derrida's works from French to English, but also for her theorizing from the dual locations of western deconstruction and postcolonial theory is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Among her many publications, Spivak has also written about the work of Bengali fiction writer and activist, Mahasweta Devi. Through her translations and expositions of the work of Mahasweta Devi, Spivak draws attention to the concerns of the doubly colonized tribal Indian woman. Such a woman, occupying the position of the 'subaltern' (a term you have already come across in the unit

on “Postcolonialism”), is shown to be effectively marginalized into silence. Through deconstructive strategies, Spivak shows how we can begin to realize and understand the situation of those at the extreme margins of oppressive cultures. In her book *The Postcolonial Critic*, Spivak draws together these two discourses, namely, deconstruction and postcolonial feminism to inquire more closely into their alignments and divergences (Spivak, 1990).

Among other Indian feminists, Uma Narayan in her book *De-Centering the Centre*, opens up a discussion between contemporary western cultural criticism and postcolonialism (Narayan, 2000). While discussing the similarities between “gender essentialism” and “cultural essentialism,” Narayan warns us against the essentialist constructions of third world cultures and representations of third world femininity in contemporary discourses, which otherwise are sympathetic to concerns of “other” cultures and women. She promotes rather, a view taken by other anti-essentialist feminists which might pay attention to differences while avoiding the dangers of essentialising such differences.

As you can see, deconstruction has influenced not only literary theory but discourses emanating from cultural studies as well, which in turn has elicited responses from postcolonial and third world feminists, many of whom are critically aware of some of the inherent dangers of employing a generalized and benevolent discourse that reifies non-western women without adequately attending to their differences. In the next section, let us examine the reservations of various groups of feminists in this regard.

4.4.2 Divergences

Although deconstruction and feminism seem natural allies at first glance, this is true only up to a certain point. The divergences between the two are based mainly on the specific nature and agendas of the two. Firstly, we have to remember that while feminism is a movement upheld by certain theoretical and ideological positions, deconstruction is a methodology or operation which undercuts all ideological positions by showing all of them as equally subjective. Secondly, in this very difference lies a basic contradiction beyond which feminism and deconstruction must part ways. If we were to follow the deconstructive path to its logical consequences, as done by the group of Anglo-American deconstructionists, we would end up in announcing the death of all meaning after following some of the infinite pathways of meaning dispersal and deferral. Since all ideologies and theories are by nature forms of ‘master-discourses’, in other words, discourses which tend to present themselves as upholding some kind of truth, then deconstruction must also, by its very nature, reject all ideologies. Feminism, as movement and theory, would then also have to be perceived as a set of ideological principles. Seen from this perspective, deconstruction would have no choice but to deconstruct feminist agendas and show them to be based on essentialist positions!

Since deconstruction sets itself up to dismantle essences by revealing their relativity and structuration, deconstructive feminism finds itself in the somewhat awkward position of defending its own ideological position while contradicting ideologies as a whole.

Is there then a way around this conundrum? Jacques Derrida, and French feminists who adopt deconstructive strategies in their work would respond in the affirmative. It is important to note once again that the path followed by deconstructionists in France was quite different from the one taken by the Anglo-American group. While Paul de Man and others went down a slippery slope into the realm of complete free play and a journey into bottomless signifiers, in France, deconstruction was employed as much more of a political tool by the left to question and challenge oppressive and hegemonic powers established at the centre. Following the lead of French deconstructionists, feminists in Europe strategically employed deconstruction as a tool to dismantle oppressive patriarchal forces. Deconstruction, used in this way, is not a journey into oblivion but becomes rather a political intervention based very much in real, material concerns of women and other marginalized groups. It seeks not to undo all meaning but, by showing the arbitrariness of transcendental positions, it indicates that a better, more equitable way of life is possible in which plural perspectives may co-habit together.

Postmodern feminists like Linda Nicholson, Nancy Fraser and Jane Flax have all in their own ways contributed to an ongoing dialogue between feminism, postmodernism and deconstruction. Linda Nicholson's anthology on *Feminism/Postmodernism*, (1989) brings together the work of several feminist theorists like Seyla Benhabib, Susan Bordo, Judith Butler, Jane Flax, Nancy Fraser, Donna Haraway, and Sandra Harding, all of whom have contributed to the debate about the potential benefits of postmodernism from a feminist perspective. Feminist theorists have been especially interested in studying the essentialism conundrum, as described in the sections above, and in attempting to find possible resolutions to this conundrum. In *The Essential Difference*, an anthology edited by Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed (1994), several feminist theorists, including Diana Fuss, Teresa De Lauretis and Gayatri Spivak examine this problem from various different angles. In the next section, we will look at potential re-alignments between deconstruction and feminism, through the work of some of these theorists.

4.4.3 Re-Alignments

Through her work on marginalization and the postcolonial woman, Gayatri Spivak offers one way out of the conundrum of an anti-essentialist deconstruction and what appears to be an essentialist position from which women must speak. Using the example of the subaltern woman ("Can the subaltern speak?"), Spivak observes that the problem of the marginalized

is that they need to speak from their position of marginalization in order to draw attention to their condition. But adopting any kind of permanent position runs the risk of essentialism, something the deconstructionists would be most wary of, as you would have noted above. Feminism in general is an ideology based on gender, which seems an essentialist position because it is inextricable from biology. If women are to speak about their (oppressive) situations as women, they must speak from their position as women. But to do so immediately implies speaking from an essentialist position (a stable and permanent claim to the truth of women's experiences rooted in their gender). In order to move beyond this essentialist trap, Gayatri Spivak proposes the use of a "strategic essentialism" (the original Greek word for which is "catachresis"). (Spivak, 1994, p. 155) What this implies is that while the subaltern woman is located at the margins, she must use that position to define her temporary essence so that she can make use of a political discourse to articulate her struggle. However, Spivak points out the temporal nature of any such position so that we do not risk freezing strategic essences into any kind of permanent essence. Deconstruction, in this way, may enable the marginalized woman to adopt a temporary essence, a podium from which it is possible to speak and be heard, within the larger feminist struggle towards equality.

In the same anthology, Diana Fuss, in her essay "Reading like a Feminist" attempts to do this by using Locke's distinction between "real essences" and "nominal essences" (Fuss in Schor, 1994, p. 101). Nominal essences, which point to a position occupied by women rather than any real essence of women, according to Fuss, may be especially useful for anti-essentialist feminists, "who want to hold onto the notion of women as a group without submitting to the idea that it is 'nature' which categorizes them as such." (Fuss in Schor, 1994, p. 100). Fuss concludes by emphasizing that for feminists, it is critical to hold onto the political element of women as a class, and that politics is the only essence which feminism cannot do without.

The above examples would have helped to show you that despite the obvious divergences between deconstruction and feminism, feminist theorists remain committed to those positive deconstructive strategies which will ultimately help further the political cause of women as a group. As aptly summed up by Diana Fuss, "To the extent that it is difficult to imagine a *non-political* feminism, politics emerges as feminism's essence." (Fuss, in Schor, 1994, p. 112)

4.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have learnt about the place of deconstruction as a method within the larger context of literary movements, especially structuralism and post-structuralism. We have examined the origins of deconstruction, the principle theoretical assumptions on which it is based, and its efforts

at dismantling overriding master discourses which oppress those who find themselves at the margins of history, culture and literature. We have then proceeded to outline the commonalities between deconstructive practice and feminist goals and agendas. We have seen how feminist theorists and critics in different parts of the world have been able to employ deconstructive strategies to further the cause of feminism. Despite certain obvious limitations and inherent contradictions, we have found that by and large the alliance between feminism and deconstruction has remained a strong and sustainable one. This conclusion should also push us to reflect on the fact that before we too hurriedly dismiss deconstruction and post-structuralism as western theoretical perspectives with little relevance for women in India, we need to carefully examine the extent to which deconstruction can be a helpful tool in Indian women's struggle for both symbolic representation and real equality.

4.6 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1. Explain the origins of deconstruction by locating it in the context of literary movements of the twentieth century.
2. Distinguish between Anglo-American and French deconstruction, with special reference to the work of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida.
3. Discuss some of the ways in which feminist critics could align itself with deconstruction and use deconstructive strategies to further their agendas.
4. Explain what you think are the limitations of deconstruction. Discuss these specifically in relation to feminism. Do you think these limitations hamper the cause of feminism? Why or why not?
5. To what extent do you think is deconstruction a useful praxis for the feminist movement in India? Explain with the help of your own examples based on the lives and experiences of Indian women.

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