

Block

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BLOCK 1 GENRE AND GENDER

Introduction

In the first Block of this course on 'Gender & Life Narratives', we will begin with an understanding of the literary genre of Life Narratives and its special significance in the context of gender. This Block will provide you with an introduction to key terms which will be useful in term of a discussion of life narratives. Thus, each of the four Units of this course will focus on basic concepts and theoretical debates related to the genre that we are studying here.

The first Unit will provide an introduction to 'Terms, Histories & Debates' that are linked to the genre of Life Narratives. We will begin with a discussion of the term 'Autobiography'. After defining the term, we will look at other related sub-genres such as diaries, journals, memoirs and letters to see the distinctions between these categories. The Unit provides you with a brief historical overview of biography and autobiography. It will also help you see the significance of this type of literary writing for women writers and as a way of recording women's experiences. We will emphasize Indian perspectives in our discussion as well as look at why women's biographies and autobiographies can be considered a distinct genre.

In the subsequent Unit, we will examine another important term - 'Forms' - which is associated with life narratives. This Unit will review some of the terms introduced to you in the first unit in greater detail. Here, we look at the forms of life narratives in the context of specific writings by women. The Unit will help you distinguish between public and private forms of life writing, political autobiographies and collective narrations of historical struggles. Private forms such as memoirs and diaries will be examined in greater detail with the help of brief discussions of specific literary examples. The Unit will also examine forms of life writing such as epistolary autobiography, travel writing and life writing through poetry. Thus, the Unit provides you a broad sense of the various types of forms of life writing that have historically been used as an expression of gender concerns.

The third Unit looks at "Modes" of life writing. It will help you understand how to distinguish between forms and modes since the latter focuses more on the manner in which life narratives are written. The discussion begins with a historical background to the evolution of modes of life writing, and examines religious as well as secular and collective modes. We will also look at how the writings of socially disempowered groups deviate from traditional modes of life narration.

The fourth and final Unit focuses on important theoretical debates which have influenced the contours of life narration. You would be already familiar with some postmodern and poststructuralist theories from your readings in other courses (MWG 003, MWG 007). Here, we will look at how postmodern and poststructuralist debates and ideas pose challenges to the genre of life narratives, and how the latter has responded to these challenges. Issues related to the deconstruction of truth and grand narratives through a work on language will be looked at in the context of gender. The Unit will also look at debates within postcolonialism and how these have impacted life narratives.