

Block

3

INSCRIBING THE BODY THROUGH LIFE NARRATIVES

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BLOCK 3 INSCRIBING THE BODY THROUGH LIFE NARRATIVES

Introduction

In previous courses, we have already examined representations of the body from a gendered perspective (see especially, MWG 004). In this Block, we return to issues of the body and corporeality in the context of life narratives. The four Units of this Block will take up four individual themes – corporeality, violence, re-covering and re-inventing the body – in order to examine gendered representations of the body in literary works by women writers.

The first Unit, “Corporeality” looks at women’s autobiographies from the perspective of the representation of women’s bodies, and in the light of marginalization, disability, discrimination and subversion. The Unit briefly reviews the nature of different forms of life writing such as memoirs and diaries, and turns to questions of truth and fiction. 19th century women’s life narratives are read in the context of biases and stereotypes that women have had to face. These narratives thus become documents of social and personal marginalization. Both physical and psychological pain are touched upon in the context of the disabled body, with the help of examples such as Helen Keller’s life narrative.

“Violence”, the theme of the second Unit, continues reflecting on some of the issues raised in the previous Unit. Here, questions of abuse and agency are examined through literary works by authors from around the world, including Amy Tan, Toni Morrison and Isabel Allende. The often complex relationships between love, sexuality, violence and healing are discussed through a close reading of these literary texts, and violence is represented in both personal and political terms. This Block links well with postmodern theory discussed in MWG 007, since it also examines the use of postmodern strategies such as magical realism to deal with the detrimental effects of violence, and as a way of exploring healing processes.

In the third Unit, “Re-Covering the Body”, we focus on the metaphor of veiling. The practice of veiling in different cultures is discussed both as a physical reality and as a metaphor for concealing and suppressing the feminine body. An examination of veiling in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Morocco and Afghanistan helps us to understand the ways in which veiling has been represented by women authors from these countries in their life narratives. Protests against the restrictions imposed on women and women’s efforts to emancipate themselves from the veil enable us to look at this complex issue from a gender perspective.

The fourth and final Unit, “Re-Inventing the Body” places the body in the context of feminist theory. This Unit will help you to understand the nature of patriarchal stigma attached to the female body. We will discuss the notion of the female body in relation to sexuality, identity and power as well as in relation to new visions adopted by feminists. The body is looked at not just as a suppressed identity but also as a space for liberation and empowerment, through examples of literary works which deal with the commercialization and objectification of the female body in literature and popular culture. We will also see how cultural constructions imposed through beauty myths, and through racialised stereotypes are deconstructed within life narratives.



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UNIT 1 CORPOREALITY

Naina Dey

Structure

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- 1.2 Objectives
- 1.3 Nature and Tradition of Life Narratives
 - 1.3.1 Nature of Autobiographies, Memoirs, Diaries and Journals
 - 1.3.2 The Tradition of Writing Life Narratives
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- 1.6 Let Us Sum Up
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- 1.9 Suggested Readings

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In Block 2, Units 1 and 3 of this course, you have already been introduced to “Women and Lifewriting” and “Reading and Writing Biographies”. In this unit, you will come to know further about the evolution of autobiography or life-narrative through different stages, its identity as a separate genre and its difference from memoirs/private diaries/journals, and different types of autobiography as well as some notable examples of life narratives.

This unit is slightly different from the earlier units because it lays greater emphasis on the female body in its attempt to overcome sexual exploitation and physical disability to attain freedom of expression through sexual liberation and victory over physical pain towards self-assertion. We will also examine some masculine assumptions about female stereotypes that emerged especially during the 19th century, especially those which assumed that all biographies were penned by great men, and ignored the role of women. You will also study the problematics of truth and fiction that make almost all great autobiographies of the world controversial. You will also come to

know why women's autobiographies are different from that of men's with special reference to Kamala Das' and Hellen Keller's life narratives. As you read this unit, you are encouraged to draw your own connections and inferences about some of the issues discussed here.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit you will be able to:

- Explain the nature and purpose of autobiographies/life narratives;
- Classify life narratives and name some famous autobiographies;
- Analyse the problematics of truth and fiction in life narratives;
- Discuss women's autobiographies in terms of social and personal marginalization and tools of subversion;
- Describe Sidonie Smith and Elaine Scarry's interpretation of life narratives;
- Analyse Hellen Keller's inspiring life-narrative about transcending physical disability; and
- Analyse Kamala Das' experiences of gender-discrimination and self-discovery.

1.3 THE NATURE AND TRADITION OF LIFE NARRATIVES

Let us first ask ourselves: what is an autobiography or life-narrative and what are its origins? The form of autobiography goes back to antiquity. Biographers generally rely on a wide variety of documents and viewpoints; an autobiography, however, may be based entirely on the writer's memory. In antiquity, such works were typically entitled *apologia*, purporting to be self-justification rather than self-documentation. John Henry Newman's autobiography (first published in 1864) is entitled *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* in reference to this tradition. Augustine (354-430) applied the title *Confessions* to his autobiographical work, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau used the same title in the 18th century, initiating the chain of confessional and sometimes racy and highly self-critical, autobiographies of the Romantic era and beyond.

In this section, we will begin by looking at the nature of autobiographies and what sets them apart from other forms of life narratives such as diaries and memoirs. We will then examine the tradition of writing autobiographies in order to understand the impetus behind the writing of such narratives.

1.3.1 Nature of Autobiographies, Memoirs, Diaries and Journals

We have already discussed the differences between different forms of life narratives, such as autobiographies, diaries, memoirs and journals in the first two units of this course (Block 1, Units 1 & 2). You have to remember that an autobiography is slightly different in character from a memoir.

While an autobiography typically focuses on the ‘life and times’ of the writer, a memoir has a narrower, more intimate focus on his or her own memories, feelings and emotions. One early example is that of Leonor López de Córdoba (1362-1420) who wrote what is supposed to be the first autobiography in Spanish. Notable 18th-century autobiographies in English include those of Edward Gibbon and Benjamin Franklin.

By the nineteenth-century there was a definite hierarchy of values in relation to self-representation with memoirs occupying a lower order since they involved a lesser degree of ‘seriousness’ than autobiography. As Laura Marcus puts it: “The autobiography/ memoirs distinction - ostensibly formal and generic - is bound up with a typological distinction between those human beings who are capable of self-reflection and those who are not” (Marcus, 1994, p. 21). Moreover, autobiography came to be equated with a developmental narrative which orders both time and the personality according to a purpose or goal; thus the looser, more chronological structure of the journal or diary could no longer fulfill this ‘higher’ function of autobiography.

1.3.2 The Tradition of Writing Life Narratives

We can now ask ourselves - what were the reasons behind the growth of life narratives? With the rise of education, cheap newspapers and cheap printing, modern concepts of fame and celebrity began to develop, and the beneficiaries of this were not slow to cash in on this by producing autobiographies. It became the expectation—rather than the exception—that those in the public eye should write about themselves—not only writers such as Charles Dickens (who also incorporated autobiographical elements in his novels) and Anthony Trollope, but also politicians (e.g. Henry Brooks Adams), philosophers (e.g. John Stuart Mill), churchmen such as Cardinal Newman.

About Autobiographies

What was the aim of the autobiographers? Since as students of literature you are already aware that almost all works of literature are written with some aim in mind, it is therefore natural to think that autobiographies could be written with a definite agenda viz. - as critiques of totalitarianism, as sensationalist by supposed libertines and ghostwriters. Fictional autobiographies revolved round a fictional character written as though the character was writing his/her own biography, of which Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*, is an early example. Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* is another such classic, and J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* is a well-known modern example of fictional autobiography. Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* is yet another example of fictional autobiography, as noted on the front page of the original version. In the box below, you will find listed some important autobiographies for your information and further reading.

Box No. 1.1: Some Early Autobiographies and Eminent Autobiographies

Some Early Autobiographies:

These include the 15th century *Memorias* by the Spanish noblewoman **Leonor López de Córdoba**, **Bâbur's** journal *Bâburnâma* (*Book of Babur* or *Letters of Babur*) which was written between 1493 and 1529. The earliest known autobiography in English is the early 15th-century *Booke of Margery Kempe*, describing among other things her pilgrimage to the **Holy Land** and visit to **Rome**. Notable English autobiographies of the seventeenth century include those of **Lord Herbert of Cherbury** (1643, published 1764) and **John Bunyan** (*Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 1666).

Eminent Autobiographies:

You can also use as reference for your study the autobiographical accounts of Benjamin Franklin, J.S. Mill, Anthony Trollope, Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Anne Frank, Fay Weldon, Sarojini Naidu, Mahatma Gandhi, Maitreyee Devi, Ashapurna Devi, Ruskin Bond, Amartya Sen, Nabaneeta Dev Sen and others.

1.3.3 The Problematics of Truth and Fiction in Life Narratives

‘Autobiography is indeed everywhere one cares to find it’, Candace Lang wrote in 1982, thus acknowledging a major problem for anyone who studies this topic: if the writer is always, in the broadest sense, implicated in the work, any writing may be judged to be autobiographical, depending on how one reads it. However, autobiography has also been recognized as a distinct literary genre and, as such, an important testing ground for critical controversies about a range of ideas including authorship, selfhood, representation and the division between fact and fiction. The very pervasiveness and slipperiness of autobiography has made the need to contain and control it within disciplinary boundaries all the more urgent, and many literary critics have turned to definitions as a way of stamping their academic authority on an unruly and even slightly disreputable field. In 1982, Philippe Lejeune produced the following judicious and widely quoted definition:

A retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality.

(Lejeune, 1982, p. 193)

However, Lejeune himself remained dissatisfied with this since it did not seem to provide a sufficient boundary between autobiography and the adjacent genres of biography and fiction. But one condition for autobiography

was absolute: there must be “identity between the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist*” (Lejeune, 1982, p. 193).

In his introduction to Kamala Das’ *My Story*, K. Satchidanandan writes, “The writer, ever mischievously enigmatic, kept [the readers] tantalized by dropping contradictory hints, first confessing it was nothing but truth and then declaring it was just a wish-fulfilling fantasy, an alter-life she had created for herself” (Satchidanandan, 2009, p. vii). Herein lies the problematics of truth and fiction not only in Kamala Das’ life-narrative but also in the autobiographies of many eminent people who have failed to candidly confess ‘everything’. Indeed, even Mahatma Gandhi had stated while embarking upon his own autobiography that few people are honest when it came to writing autobiographies.

However, what is interesting for you to know is that the lack of authenticity does not entail that autobiographies are of little value to serious readers. Rather it is their very ambiguity that makes the reader delve into the complexities inherent in character and the constrictions that may have motivated the narrator to simultaneously hide and expose facts.

As a recent critic of autobiography, Laura Marcus has noted that the concept of ‘intention’ has persistently threaded its way through discussions of autobiography. Within critical discussions of autobiography, ‘intention’ has had a necessary and often unquestioned role in providing the crucial link between author, narrator and protagonist. Intention, however, is further defined as a particular kind of ‘honest’ intention which then guarantees the ‘truth’ of the writing. Trust the author, this rather circular argument goes, if s/he seems to be trustworthy.

Check Your Progress:

Do you think that truth and authenticity are absolutely essential in the writing of autobiographies? What is the relation between truth and intention, in this context?

1.3.4 Carlyle, the Great Man Theory and its Critics

Another fact that has to be noted by you is how the 'act' of writing autobiographies or life narratives had been taken solely as men's domain. One theory to corroborate this masculinist theory was the **Great Man Theory**. The **Great Man Theory** was a popular 19th century idea according to which history can be largely explained by the impact of 'great men', or heroes: highly influential individuals who, due to either their personal charisma, intelligence, wisdom, or Machiavellianism utilized their power in a way that had a decisive historical impact. The theory was popularized in the 1840s by Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle.

But the **Great Man Theory** did have its critics. One of the most vitriolic critics of Carlyle's formulation of the **Great Man Theory** was Herbert Spencer. In 1860 Herbert Spencer formulated a decisive counter-argument that remained influential throughout the 20th century. He believed that attributing historical events to the decisions of individuals was a hopelessly primitive, childish, and unscientific position as the men Carlyle called 'great men' were merely products of their social environment whose actions would have been impossible without the social conditions built before their lifetime.

1.4 WRITING THE BODY

Now that we have located life narratives within a historical context, and examined some of the masculinist assumptions about the writing of life narratives, let us focus more closely on the issue of corporeality for the purposes of this unit. In order to do so, we will begin with a discussion of 19th century women's life narratives.

1.4.1 19th Century Women's Life Narratives

Nineteenth-century England was the period which saw the growth of literature by women. It is notable that, due to the impact of mass industrialization in England, relationships increasingly became mercantile and mechanistic. The position of the male breadwinner of the family acquired greater prominence while women had to conform to a role, a set pattern of female stereotypes devised by men. The 'perfect Victorian lady' was to function solely as daughter, wife or mother, an ideal which had little connection with any functional and responsible role in society.

On the other hand, in spite of masculine predominance in the field of literature, the age saw the emergence of a vast number of women writers writing from the depths of their own experiences as females. The issue of what a woman's 'place' ought to be in a proper society had begun to obsess a startling range of thinkers and writers as George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emile Bronte, Charlotte Bronte and others who, in their own

ways, tried to find a solution to the Woman Question by revising the male ideologies in order to recognize female power.

During the Victorian age however, one became more aware of what was being said in the 'silences and exclusions of the female experience' and of what female stereotypes (such as, 'The Angel in the House', 'The Fallen Woman', 'The Madwoman', 'The Siren') revealed about the needs and uncertainties of the Victorian male who were mainly preoccupied with women's physical and mental inferiority. Early medical writers believed that the delicacy of the female reproductive system gave rise to physical and mental disturbance thus making a woman highly vulnerable to physical and mental derangement. There was now a double 'politics of gender' at work: an outer struggle for women's legal and political rights and the inner struggle of both men and women to cope with the demands of powerful but failing cultural stereotypes.

One of the most formidable writers of the late Victorian period, Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was critically engaged all her life in the problem of writing lives and, in particular, the problem of writing women's lives. An important modernist writer of fiction, she also questioned, from a feminist perspective, traditional accounts of the subject and prefigured and even helped to influence present-day debates about writing and sexual difference. Woolf took her bearings from her father Leslie Stephen's work as biographer, but found herself intrigued by what she called 'the lives of the obscure', the forgotten lives, mostly of women, who had been marginalized by Stephen's selection of 'great men' in his *The Dictionary of National Biography*.

1.4.2 Biases and Stereotypes

As you can see, women writers faced severe discrimination which negatively impacted women's writings (in this case, life narratives). Indeed, the autobiography genre has received serious scholarly attention only in the last fifty years and much of this work has focused on the writings of men rather than women. Early scholars focused almost exclusively on the lifestyle and the perceived moral state of the author and not on the form and style of the genre itself. However, recent scholarship suggests that women possessed a unique mode of self-representation and set of justifications for their self-histories and that these perceptions have evolved from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century.

According to P. Lejeune, the author of an autobiography implicitly declares that he is the person he says he is and that the author and the protagonist are the same (Lejeune, 1982, p. 202). But have we necessarily believed all subjects in the same way? Have all signatures had the same legal status? Does not sincerity itself, as Nancy Miller suggests, already imply a masculine subject, since women are less likely to be believed simply on account of who they are? (Miller, 1988, p. 52).

Miller's argument demonstrates the extent to which the genre of autobiography has been implicitly bound up with gender. Insofar as autobiography has been seen as promoting a view of the subject as universal, it has also underpinned the centrality of masculine – and, we may add, Western and middle-class – modes of subjectivity.

Other scholars have focused on what nineteenth century women's autobiographies reveal about how women perceived themselves, their self defined gender ideology, the issues of particular concern in their lives, and factual information about their accomplishments and lifestyles. Few women published autobiographies until the end of the nineteenth century; among the most famous are Margaret Oliphant, Harriet Martineau, Annie Besant, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

1.4.3 Marginalization and Identity

In what way then can we claim women's autobiography as counter-traditional? Feminist critics writing about autobiography in the 1980s encountered an obvious gap: the absence of women's texts from an accepted canon of autobiographical writing, a canon which placed the 'confessional' texts of Saint Augustine and Rousseau at its centre. As with other genres, it was not that women did not produce autobiographical writing but that it was deemed to be unimportant, crude or illegitimate, thus failing to live up to the necessary test of 'great writing'. If male critics had too easily conflated the description of a genre with a narrative of the masculine subject, feminist critics sought validation for women's experience in a not dissimilar way, by using autobiographical texts as reference for life. The notion of a pre-existing self underlying the text and accessed by it bypasses the problem of who the subject is and how she is constituted.

Since language is 'phallogentric', that is, it subsumes the feminine into a masculine 'universal', women's difference is produced in terms of an absence or gap within language, which can also be used as a subversive space. Autobiography has been one of the most important sites of feminist debate precisely because it demonstrates that there are many different ways of writing the subject.

In her book *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the 20th century* (1993), Sidonie Smith discusses the way in which nineteenth century women created a 'self' within their writings and the way in which Victorian ideology limited women's conceptualization of themselves. Smith makes three main points: that women autobiographers see themselves as enmeshed in the lives of others, rather than as the unencumbered, imperial, self-sufficient ego of masculinist autobiographies; that women of colour use their autobiographies to contest the negative stereotypes applied to them by whites, presumably men; and that women

write from their experiences as female people embedded in a hostile (male) culture. For Smith, identity is postmodern: constantly shifting, ambiguous, fragmented, and segmented. Her own words explain her conclusions like this:

The autobiographer's specific body is ... the site of heterogeneous axes of signification that become constitutive of the subject of autobiography. Bearing multiple marks of location, bodies position the autobiographical subject at the nexus of culturally specific experiences, of gender, race, sexual orientation, and health among them, and at the nexus of 'micropolitical practices' that derive from the cultural meaning of those points of identification.

(Smith & Watson, 1992, p.130)

Critics agree that women's autobiographical writing differed from men's in several regards. First, women authors felt that they had to defend their decision to write about themselves. Particularly in the early nineteenth century, society believed that women should not call attention to themselves, in their lives or deeds. Women autobiographers often attempted to assure readers of their ordinary lives, filled with domestic duties and service to their families. The authors justified their writing as a moral obligation, either to educate others or to entertain other women.

Women autobiographers differ from men in their focus, often de-emphasizing the role of men in their lives and writing mostly about themselves and other women. In addition, women writers reflect the cultural ideologies and assumptions of their period. Often, they emphasize the aspects of life that were considered to be within the women's sphere in the nineteenth century: childcare, housekeeping, nursing, marriage and family. Critics note that these women's autobiographies provide information about the private family sphere which is often unavailable in other official sources.

Virginia Woolf has been a key figure for critics of autobiography who, drawing on the psychoanalytic writings of both Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva, have seen her writing as opening up the question of the feminine as a challenge to the phallic or masculine position of the subject. By conceiving of the subject as subject to dissolution and by exploring those fragmented, inchoate and repressed psychic realms, also coded with the symbolic as feminine, Woolf is seen as undermining the unity and confidence of that universal 'I' claimed by the masculine subject.

1.4.4 Anxieties and Self-Justification

What, then, we might ask, do women autobiographers feel about themselves? Are they happy with their counter-traditional roles? Elizabeth Winston states that nineteenth-century women's autobiographies were conciliatory, and

the authors' 'need to assure readers of their womanliness results in apologies, disclaimers, and words of self-depreciation.' Genaro Padilla gives rise to another question of form, that is, whether autobiographical accounts that were collected by a scholar rather than recorded solely by the source are valid. But Julia Swindells has argued that, the autobiographical self is not invented but constructed by 'calling on' the representations that are historically available and which may include fictional ones. Thus, nineteenth-century working-class women, according to Swindells, turned to the novel, the melodrama or romance as models when they came to represent their own lives, as places where women were at least visible, albeit in a 'reified' or 'idealised' form. That politicizing or 'rematerializing' of difference which autobiography has been seen as undertaking is therefore always a complex matter involving both the subject's discursive position, and material/historical location. As cultural critic Stuart Hall has argued, discursive practices 'always implicate' the positions from which we speak and therefore 'though we speak, so to say 'in our own name', of ourselves and from our own experience, nevertheless who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never identical, never exactly in the same place' (Hall, 1990, p. 222). Thus women's writings (including autobiographies) subvert the all pervasive masculine assumptions about paternity, succession and hierarchy that have resulted in cultural imperialism. Woolf however, compares this transgression as 'hymeneal rupture' and in her feminist polemic *A Room of One's Own*, implies that women who did not apologize for their literary efforts were defined by patriarchy as mad and monstrous: freakish because 'unsexed' or freakish because sexually 'fallen'. Moreover, literary and social conventions dictate that women writers should concern themselves with 'women's world', 'women's interests', 'women's tastes', 'women's brains'. In the above discussion, we have focused on issues relating to the marginalization of women writers. In the next section, let us turn specifically to the role of the body in women's life narratives in examining the latter from a gender perspective.

Check Your Progress:

- i) *Why have women autobiographers had to struggle against biases and stereotypes?*

- ii) *Can you think of an Indian woman writer who has succeeded in overcoming such biases? Describe her work.*

1.5 THE BODY, DISABILITY AND PAIN IN WOMEN'S LIFE NARRATIVES

Problematically for feminists, the opposition between mind and body has often been correlated with an opposition between male and female, with the female regarded as trapped within her bodily existence in a way that makes attainment of rationality questionable. In developing philosophical frameworks for making sense of sexual difference, feminist philosophers have provided accounts of the relationship between subjectivity, corporeality and identity which are applicable to other aspects of our corporeal existence. Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price comment that 'What is required, and what has emerged over subsequent years, is a theory of embodiment that could take account not simply of sexual difference but of racial difference, class difference and differences due to disability; in short the specific contextual materiality of the body' (Price and Shildrick, 1999, p. 5). Now, let us examine some of the above issues related to the body and corporeality in the context of the works of three women autobiographers: Elaine Scarry, Helen Keller and Kamala Das.

1.5.1 Scarry's Unique Study of the Body and Pain

Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* is known as a definitive study of pain and the infliction of pain. She argues that physical pain leads to destruction and the unmaking of the human world, whereas human creation at the opposite end of the spectrum leads to the making of the world.

The language of pain is necessarily a language of absence; the person testifying to pain, through visual or verbal representation, attempts to give proof of an event that resists expression. Herein lies the polarity of Scarry's work; she opposes the destructive quality of pain to the body and language with modes of creativity that seek to express what language resists. While the first section theorizes the inexpressibility of physical pain and its lack of referent, the second named 'Making' claims that it is this inexpressibility that serves as the impetus to create (an argument that you can use to interpret Helen Keller's life-narrative about which you will come to know in the following section). Once the body is turned inside-out i.e. the body is no longer considered an amalgamation of mere parts or objects, shapes and mechanisms, the body is now seen in terms of subjectivity, in terms of requirements and needs. Therefore mere survival mechanism will now be converted into a sense of 'aliveness' or 'awareness of aliveness'. In this way physical debilitation can become a constructive factor behind self-awareness. Scarry's work may also be used to interpret the concept of gender and sex (in female writers) as causes of mental and physical disability.

In this context, it would be useful for you to refer to the work *Dis)embodied Form: Issues of Disabled Women* (2003), of polio survivor Anita Ghai, who is an activist fighting for the rights of disabled women. Both Ghai and Keller have not only overcome their physical impairment but become pioneers in their own rights: the impairment has become the impetus for something bigger and loftier. Women's bodies are regarded from time immemorial as commodities to be preened and maintained to enable them to entice men into matrimony so that they would have the material means to live. Women's attention to their bodies therefore took the form of producing them as objects for others' appraisal. By regimes of dieting, makeup, exercise, dress, cosmetic surgery, women try to sculpt their bodies into shapes which reflect the dominant societal norms. In such a milieu the very concept of survival for women with physical disabilities seems threatened let alone their marrying or living their lives with dignity. The trajectory of Keller and others like her has become an inspiration for women who may be either hindered mentally or physically and allow for options other than (dishonourable) marriages.

1.5.2 Mental and Physical Disability in Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life*

Above, we read about Scarry's claim of inexpressibility as the impetus to creativity. In this context, our point of focus here is Hellen Keller's *The Story of My Life*. What is Keller's narrative about? The story of **Helen Keller** is the story of a child who, at the age of 19 months, suddenly loses her hearing and vision, and who, against overwhelming odds and with a great deal of persistence, grows into a very intelligent, sensitive woman and a social activist.

The illness that struck the infant Helen Keller, and left her deaf and blind before she learned to speak, was diagnosed as brain fever at the time (perhaps it was scarlet fever). As Helen grew from infancy into childhood she was wild and unruly, and had little real understanding of the world around her. However, the turning point in her life came on a March day in 1887 when she was a few months short of seven years old. On that day, which Helen Keller was always to refer to as "the most important day I can remember in my life," Anne Mansfield Sullivan came to Tuscumbia to be her teacher. Miss Sullivan, a 20-year-old graduate of the Perkins School for the Blind, who had regained useful sight through a series of operations, had come to the Kellers through the sympathetic interest of Alexander Graham Bell. From that fateful day, the two—teacher and pupil—were inseparable until the death of the former in 1936.

Miss Anne Sullivan not only succeeded in turning the uncontrolled child into a responsible human being but also succeeded in awakening and stimulating her marvelous mind - a story that is today familiar to millions, most notably through William Gibson's play and film, *The Miracle Worker*, Miss Keller's autobiography of her early years, *The Story of My Life*, and Joseph Lash's *Helen and Teacher*.

Miss Sullivan began her task with a doll that the children at Perkins had made for her to take to Helen. By spelling 'd-o-l-l' into the child's hand, she hoped to teach her to connect objects with letters. Helen quickly learned to form the letters correctly and in the correct order, but did not know she was spelling a word, or even that words existed. In the days that followed she learned to spell a great many more words in this uncomprehending way.

One day she and 'Teacher'—as Helen always called her—went to the outdoor pump. Miss Sullivan started to draw water and put Helen's hand under the spout. As the cool water gushed over one hand, she spelled into the other hand the word 'w-a-t-e-r' first slowly, then rapidly. Suddenly, the signals had meaning in Helen's mind. She knew that 'water' meant the wonderful cool liquid flowing over her hand. Quickly, she stopped and touched the

earth and demanded its letter name and by nightfall she had learned 30 words.

Thus began Helen Keller's education. She proceeded quickly to master the alphabet, both manual and in raised print for blind readers, and gained facility in reading and writing. In 1890, when she was just 10, she expressed a desire to learn to speak. Somehow she had found out that a little deaf-blind girl in Norway had acquired that ability. Miss Sarah Fuller of the Horace Mann School was her first speech teacher.

Even when she was a little girl, Helen Keller had a desire to go to college and in 1898 she did enter the Cambridge School for Young Ladies to prepare for Radcliffe College. She entered Radcliffe in the fall of 1900 and received her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1904. Throughout these years and until her own death in 1936, Anne Sullivan was always by Helen's side, laboriously spelling book after book and lecture after lecture, into her pupil's hand.

Helen Keller's formal schooling ended when she received her B.A. degree, but throughout her life she continued to study and stay informed on all matters of importance to modern people. In recognition of her wide knowledge and many scholarly achievements, she received honorary doctoral degrees from Temple University and Harvard University and from the Universities of Glasgow, Scotland; Berlin, Germany; Delhi, India; and Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. She was also an Honorary Fellow of the Educational Institute of Scotland. Anne Sullivan's marriage, in 1905, to John Macy, an eminent critic and prominent socialist, caused no change in the teacher-pupil relationship. Helen went to live with the Macys and both husband and wife unstintingly gave their time to help her with her studies and other activities.

While still at Radcliffe, Helen Keller began a writing career that was to continue on and off for 50 years. In 1903, *The Story of My Life*, which had first appeared in serial form in the *Ladies Home Journal*, appeared in book form. This was always to be the most popular of her works and today is available in more than 50 languages. Miss Keller's other published works include *Optimism*, an essay; *The World I Live In*; *The Song of the Stone Wall*; *Out of the Dark*; *My Religion*; *Midstream—My Later Life*; *Peace at Eventide*; *Helen Keller in Scotland*; *Helen Keller's Journal*; *Let Us Have Faith*; *Teacher, Anne Sullivan Macy*; and *The Open Door*. She was also a frequent contributor to magazines and newspapers, writing mostly on blindness, deafness, socialism, social issues, and women's rights. She used a braille typewriter to prepare her manuscripts and then copied them on a regular typewriter.

Keller went on to become a world-famous speaker and author. She is remembered as an advocate for people with disabilities, amid numerous

other causes. She was a suffragist, a pacifist, an opponent of Woodrow Wilson, a radical socialist and a birth control supporter. In 1915 she and George Kessler founded the Helen Keller International (HKI) organization. This organization is devoted to research in vision, health and nutrition. In 1920 she helped to found the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Keller traveled to 40 some-odd countries with Sullivan, making several trips to Japan and becoming a favorite of the Japanese people. Keller met every U.S. President from Grover Cleveland to Lyndon B. Johnson and was friends with many famous figures, including Alexander Graham Bell, Charlie Chaplin and Mark Twain. Keller and Mark Twain were both considered radicals at the beginning of the 20th century, and as a consequence, their political views have been forgotten or glossed over in popular perception.

Keller was a member of the Socialist Party and actively campaigned and wrote in support of the working class from 1909 to 1921. She supported Socialist Party candidate Eugene V. Debs in each of his campaigns for the presidency. Newspaper columnists who had praised her courage and intelligence before she expressed her socialist views now called attention to her disabilities.

However, we must also keep in mind that recognition did not come to Keller easily. Despite her hard-earned accomplishments, Helen was at first regarded with pity due to her blindness and people underestimated her abilities more so for she was a woman - prejudices that the intelligent and sensitive Keller was quick to detect. Keller experienced a double sense of oppression for being a woman who was also visually impaired. Before Keller there was no standard Braille system. It was Keller who modified the existing Braille that used 12 dots (a system that was initially invented by a French soldier in order to send coded messages), to one that required only 6 dots which could create 63 characters. Moreover, with the new Braille system, one can read almost every European language. It would be interesting here, for you to look at the Bollywood film *Black* which was inspired by Keller's story. We also have many other inspiring stories of eminent people who have overcome physical/mental disabilities which can be taken into account viz. Sudha Chandran (orthopaedically handicapped), singers Ravindra Jain and Krishna Chandra Dey (visual impairment), Stephen Hawking (motor neurone disease), and Whoopi Goldberg (learning disability).

1.5.3 Kamala Das' Triply Marginalized Self Narrative

You may have noted that so far, our study has been dominated by 'white' female authors. How can we then fit in **Kamala Das'** self-narrative into this study? Or to put it more succinctly, from what perspective can we regard Kamala Das' autobiography as a documentation of the marginalization of the Indian middle-class woman?

It is true that while in the west, women's studies began with literature and history, in India especially, its inspiration as a formal inquiry sprang from a more direct concern with the low status of women in society. Originally it was seen as arising out of particular social evils (*sati*, *purdah*, child marriage, child widows, ban on widow remarriage, and so on), which afflicted sections of Hindu society. Though after the independence of India in 1947, the Hindu Code, passed as separate Acts between 1950 and 1955, rewrote for Hindus the laws of marriage and divorce, adoption and inheritance, and adult suffrage added women to the electoral roles, the growing women's movement around issues of dowry, rape, prostitution, domestic violence, birth control and health led to research on these subjects as well as on the nature of women's struggles. Culture and ideology came gradually to be added to the list.

In this context, the mere emphasis on 'sexual difference' when it came to interpreting self-narratives has elided other forms of difference. There has been the proliferation of 'new social movements' following the early 1980s, each with a specific focus or theme such as sexuality, race, ethnicity or class. So far as life narratives are concerned, their deconstruction as a genre which privileged a white, masculine subject gave way, as part of this same moment of diversification, to a sense of their potential or use as political strategy by these new social groups. Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith have argued that the marginalized subject, by "deploying autobiographical practices that go against the grain" can constitute "an 'I' that becomes a place of creative and, by implication, political intervention" (Smith and Watson, 1992, p. xix). Julia Swindells has provided a more wide-ranging but similarly optimistic account of the new radical uses of autobiography:

Autobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual. People in a position of powerlessness - women, black people, working-class people - have more than begun to insert themselves into the culture via autobiography, via the assertion of a 'personal' voice, which speaks beyond itself.

(Swindells, 1995, p. 7)

The idea that autobiography can become 'the text of the oppressed' articulating through one person's experience, experiences which may be representative of a particular marginalized group, is an important one: autobiography becomes both a way of testifying to oppression and empowering the subject through their cultural inscription and recognition.

Thus, women's writing in India at present has a relevance and a validity for more reasons than one. Not only does it project the observations, situations,

responses and struggles of women within the ambit of kinship, marriage and procreation, it also questions values and structures hitherto considered axiomatic, and in turn focuses attention on the definition of freedom and creativity while throwing up queries related to oppression and colonization. Therefore, one finds most of the post-colonial feminist critics in India and the Third World detect and decry a 'colonialist move' in Western feminist criticism. In the words of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, it "celebrates the heroines of the First World in a singular and individualist, and the collective presence of women elsewhere in a pluralized and inchoate fashion" (Spivak cited in Dey, 2011, p. 24).

Let us now consider Kamala Das' 'story' or life narrative.

Though **Kamala Das** is one of the greatest poets of the century, it is her autobiographical sketches in *My Story* that shot her into the limelight in the literary arena. Its outspokenness and frank portrayal of extra-marital relations led on to the book becoming a cult classic. Since then this book has been known widely and often read for all the wrong reasons.

Kamala Das is believed to have portrayed her own life in *My Story*. The story is about a young woman writer who is forced into an arranged marriage with a much older, lustful, man. Though she is not much educated formally, she has such a literary background that formal education ceases to matter. Fed-up with a boring, loveless domestic life, the protagonist begins to look for very physical affairs with men outside marriage but is soon disillusioned with the male gender in general. This is the first book in India which speaks so openly of the sexual desires of the average Indian woman, the subject which is always hastily swept under the carpet even now.

The novel also predominates with the metaphor of disease and sickness that the narrator herself undergoes, along with her eldest son who seem to be a chronic patient, falling prey to the tentacles of grave diseases fearing impending death but miraculously surviving with care and treatment. The symbols of illness form a portrayal of aberration in her life – a life that is devoid of peace and tranquility, a life that is forever rocking in the sea of turbulence, seeking an anchor but finding none, strives to stay afloat in those disturbed waters of turmoil and trepidation.

In this context, we can acknowledge Catherine Belsey's perspective of how a woman while submitting to "the authority of the social formation represented in ideology as the Absolute Subject (God, the king, boss, Man, conscience)" (Belsey, 1991, p. 596), also at times finds agency and the ability to resist received roles and definitions. As suggested by Julia Kristeva, she focuses on 'process' and possibilities for change therein: "The subject is ... the site of contradiction, and is consequently perpetually in the process of construction, thrown into crisis by alterations in language and in the social formation, capable of change" (Belsey, 1991, p. 597).

Belsey notes, “Women as a group in our society are both produced and inhibited by contradictory discourses. Very broadly, we participate both in the liberal-humanist discourse of freedom, self-determination and rationality and at the same time the specifically feminine discourse offered by society of submission, relative inadequacy and irrational intuition” (Belsey, 1991, p. 597-98). Belsey thus pinpoints the central contradiction that is subjectivity, as it simultaneously enables and inhibits. But perhaps the most effective explanation for Kamala Das’ ‘story’ would be Gayle Rubin’s powerful argument in her essay “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality” (1984): “The realm of sexuality... has its own internal politics, inequities, and modes of oppression. As with other aspects of human behavior, the concrete institutional forms of sexuality at any given time and place are products of human activity. They are imbued with conflicts of interest and political maneuvering, both deliberate and incidental. In that sense, sex is always political” (Rubin, 1993, p. 4).

Activity:

Read any one of the three works discussed in the above section. Analyse the representation of the body in the light of the above discussion and jot down your observations.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

We may finally conclude our study by asking ourselves - what is the relevance of studying women's life narratives? While taking into account life narratives of Das and Keller, we have to remember that the discrimination women still meet now takes place against a different backdrop. From the political point of view, what is significant about the various attempts to challenge legislation set up to help women is that there is clearly no longer any consensus among the populace that women suffer from structural discrimination and need extra help. Nevertheless, simultaneously male hostility to women is still a significant social fact and this is where Das and Keller remain relevant today. Old sexual attitudes remain highly problematic, especially for vulnerable women and rape, sexual violence and harassment, economic and financial exploitation are all real and not imaginary problems which are unfortunately increasingly on the rise in countries around the world. Also, little has been done to improve working conditions for those who are physically disabled, and marital disputes demand that more often than not it is the woman who must compromise for the sake of family and security. Anita Ghai referring to marriage as a difficult endeavour for disabled women, in one of her interviews, adds that in a patriarchal society, all women are disabled. For gender studies students as yourself therefore, what becomes more challenging in the present scenario is to use women's life narratives as a medium by which to locate and reinterpret women's personal/physical/psychological crises as well as subtle means of gender discrimination that are still continuing in various forms.

1.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Do you consider self narratives as manifestations of an individual's personality? Discuss.
- 2) Explain how women's autobiographies act as tools of subversion considering the traditional social bias faced by women writers.
- 3) Do you think Kamala Das' *My Story* is simply a saga of 'the disenchanted Indian housewife' or a notorious incitement to aberration? Justify with examples from the narrative.
- 4) Consider both Kamala Das' and Helen Keller's self narratives as attempts to emancipation and self-discovery.
- 5) Analyse the self narratives of Kamala Das and Hellen Keller in the context of Elaine Scarry's portrayal of the relation between the castrating effect of pain and creativity.
- 6) Do you think women's self narratives are essentially feminist in essence? Give reasons for your answer, using specific examples wherever necessary.

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UNIT 2 VIOLENCE

Giti Chandra

Structure

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Objectives
- 2.3 Background: Twice Abused Bodies and Question of Agency
- 2.4 Toni Morrison: *Beloved*
- 2.5 Amy Tan: *The Joy Luck Club*
- 2.6 Isabel Allende: *The House of Spirits*
- 2.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.8 Unit End Questions
- 2.9 References
- 2.10 Suggested Readings

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit, you read about the representation of corporeality and associated themes of pain, disability and marginalization of the female body in women's life narratives. In this Unit, we will take up an interdisciplinary study of violence, and look at its narrativisation and affects, of collective identity formation, national, ethnic or racial. We will study the ways in which these narratives are gendered by women who are subjected to violence, who survive these conflicts and who narrate both the violence and the collective identity. Our study is focused around widely read novels written by contemporary women authors, largely for Anglophone or English-speaking audiences. We will see Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Sula*, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Isabel Allende's *The House of Spirits* as being representative of a unique sub category of the contemporary novel. This sub category focuses on extreme or intense violence in the lives both of its protagonists and of the collective to which they belong in the process of defining the identity of that collective. Each of these novels deals with a different historical event of violence.

As we will undertake a close reading of the three novels mentioned above, you are strongly encouraged to read the original texts in order to gain a better understanding of the analyses presented here.

2.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this Unit and a close reading of the texts discussed, you will be able to:

- Identify constructions of individual and collective identities in relation to narratives of violence;
- Explain how each text interrogates the nature of the collective formed;
- Discuss the deployment of narrative strategies, tropes and elements to create new possibilities;
- Contextualize the above within literary and historical frameworks; and
- Critically analyse the theorisation of violence, collective identities and their narrativisation.

2.3 BACKGROUND: TWICE ABUSED BODIES AND THE QUESTION OF AGENCY

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, and Isabel Allende's *The House of Spirits* can all be viewed as being representative of a unique sub category of the contemporary novel, as these texts are embedded in a theorization of violence.

Beloved returns to Slavery in America in its construction of the African American identity, defining its violence as intimate and personal. Tan presents the violence of the Second World War from the point of view of a single woman fleeing the Japanese invasion of China and *The House Of Spirits* provides a fictional account of the violence of both feudal Chile as well as State torture. We will see that the constructions of individual and collective identities in these texts are deeply embedded in these narratives of violence.

A good introduction to this area of study is through a single incident in one of the novels: the rape of Alba in Isabelle Allende's *House Of Spirits* and her decision to give birth to the consequent child. The political implications of literary tropes such as Alba's - the raped and consequently pregnant woman who decides not to abort the child - is important for two reasons: First, the implications of this trope often run counter to the overt intentions of the author. In the case of these highly political works such a contradiction is disquieting and significant. Second, it presents a disturbing aspect of the use of non-realist strategies about which you will learn in a subsequent section of this Unit.

The trope of the raped and pregnant female body is such an ordinary, much-used one, that a reader may well pass over its subtle complexities as being part of its biological (hence 'natural') nature. But it is worth

remembering that the peculiar poignancy of this trope derives from its literal facticity: women in ethnic conflicts the world over are raped as much to reap the political capital of the possible child as in violent vengeance to redress perceived grievances. The child, if it is born, is this vengeance made flesh: it derives its power from not just its literal identity (modified/determined by the enemy in racial and religious terms) but perhaps more profoundly, from its symbolic identity. It is this seamlessness that we will focus on - a seamlessness that language adopts and reproduces through devices such as symbolism and magic realism. In doing so, there may be a very real danger that it reproduces, the social, cultural and political forces that make such a crime possible in the first place. The symbolism that surrounds the woman's body, investing it, against the woman's will and consent, with meaning and value derived from patriarchal social structures and ideologies, is reinvented, reinscribed and perpetuated through these tropes.

Further, the woman's victimhood is ironically twisted to serve the very ideologies that first perpetrated it. The trope works to invest the unborn child with the symbolic power of the future: not, to be sure, necessarily a bright one, but certainly one that bears the responsibility to lay to rest a violent past. In choosing to give birth to the child, the woman is making what is, in essence, a historically compelled choice: to end the cycle of violence by either not accusing the rapist(s) (as in J.M Coetzee's novel *Grace*) or by not aborting the unborn child, as in *The House Of Spirits*. The unborn child (which must remain 'unborn' in order to adequately figure an unseen future) represents a future in which warring factions will be necessarily, even organically, united. Both Allende's context of the State and the rebel and Coetzee's context of racist South Africa demand such a future as the only desirable one. Of course, the power to end such a material thing as state/racial violence lies precisely in acknowledging the symbolic implications of both the crime and the decision to keep the child. This issue can be separated from that of the much debated issue of female agency expressed through the act of suicide. This possibility is raised constantly in both Kingston's and Tan's novels and is pitted against the absolute submission of the woman - even to the death - by patriarchal structures.

We can see that it is important to focus on the problems inherent in any trope that seeks to 'transform' victimhood into a species of 'heroism' or agency through the further self-mutilation or destruction of the victim herself. The rhetoric of heroism camouflages all too neatly the fruition of the most destructive form of patriarchy, forcing the woman to shoulder the burden of righting a wrong perpetrated by men and systems beyond her control. Historically, we know this trope to be a completely inaccurate representation of the actual political power or agency allowed/allotted to

women not holding political office. The main thrust and efficacy of this trope lies, clearly, in its aesthetic appeal: its ability to play upon or otherwise exploit a symbology that has proved, repeatedly, to be destructive - in the most violent manner - of every conceivable aspect of the woman's being and body.

The fact that these tropes are used so powerfully in texts which struggle to avoid these very structures and ideologies is an index to their literal truth: the thousands of women to be thus assaulted, who have no recourse but to bear the resulting child, wield a powerful hold on public emotion - and literary imagination. However, it is, of course, this very 'truth' that needs dismantling and deconstructing. Stripped of this symbolism, the woman's body would be less vulnerable to violence of this kind. Exploiting the trope in the absence of such dismantling amounts to that body being used twice over, both times in the service of an ideology that the authors of these texts most certainly repudiate.

How, then, do we account for this fault line that runs between the authors' politics and their aesthetic/literary practices? Magic realism and other non-realist techniques employed by these authors enable the slippage between the literal and the symbolic. Indeed, the seamlessness with which material reality co-habits the same space as certain symbolic tropes and the ways in which the use of non-realist techniques aids this fluidity is crystallised in this trope. Magic and other non-realist strategies alert and make us attentive to worlds and possibilities otherwise inaccessible through realist techniques. It is also equally true that at least in some cases, these worlds and possibilities are constructed upon and indicated through tropes that subvert and destabilise them. The irony should not be lost upon us: these are tropes that should, themselves, be subverted and destabilised - and indeed would be if they were used in accordance with these authors' political affiliations. Yet, the sheer creative exuberance combined with the literary and political rebelliousness of magic and other non-realistic strategies serve to blind both readers and writers to its vulnerabilities. We can see that such blindness is a severe handicap and one that we can ill afford.

Let us now examine some of the above issues in the context of individual literary texts, which you are encouraged to read in the original.

2.4 TONI MORRISON: *BELOVED*

Beloved (1988) by well-known African-American writer Toni Morrison, is the story of a runaway woman slave named Sethe, in America after the abolition of slavery and her two daughters, Beloved and Denver. While narrating the fate of Sethe and her family after she escapes, Morrison also gives us the life of the slaves in flashbacks, which help to explain the trauma of the

women and the men who were slaves. Paul D is one of the male slaves to escape and the novel tells us his story also. *Beloved* is the name of the young woman who mysteriously joins Sethe and Denver in their house who seems to have strange, perhaps supernatural connections to the baby daughter that Sethe killed when the slave owners came to reclaim her. The novel recounts both the trauma of slavery, as well as the healing and rehabilitation of escaped slaves within the context of slavery in 19th century America.

The understanding of the reciprocal relationship between sacrificer and sacrifice can be extended to the contract between slave and master where Schoolteacher, in Morrison's *Beloved*, documents the absolute otherness of Sethe as she is being assaulted by his sons. Parasitically connected to his definition of Sethe is, of course, Schoolteacher's own defining of himself: not simply in the sense in which the slave or colonised person is rendered other by the master or coloniser, but more intimately, in that the perpetrator wrests from this violence a sense of self and subjectivity. While Sethe herself survives the ordeal as violenced body, realising the significance of the tree of welts on her back over time, we can also argue that Halle, witness to the violence but denied the bodily witness and marking which contains the horror, is Schoolteacher's true sacrificee.

As Paul D tells Sethe, "You said they stole your milk. It was that messed him up. That was it, I guess. All I knew was that something broke him. Not one of them years of Saturdays, Sundays, nighttime extra never touched him. But whatever he saw go on in that barn broke him like a twig" (Morrison, 1988, p.68). The distinction between the physical violence perpetrated upon a slave and the taking of Sethe's milk is crucial. As Paul D points out, it is the taking of the milk, rather than the brutal beating which breaks Halle. Intimately associated with the sexual assault is the idea of Sethe as animal, whose milk can be taken at will. This act is, therefore, set apart from the more familiar physical or sexual violence of whipping and rape, both of which are forms of subjugation which recognize the humanity of the slave in the very attempt to suppress the rebellion. The taking of milk, however, is a qualitatively different form of othering whereby the polarization is not one of master-slave but the far more radical one of human - animal. In whipping her, Schoolmaster has merely asserted his authority over Sethe: in allowing his boys to take her milk, he has authored/authorized her status as animal, and his own as human.

Submitting to the dehumanisation integral to such a contract, Halle is reduced to the 'animal' devoid of reason and dignity that Schoolteacher sees the slave as being. "You may as well know it all", Paul D tells Sethe. "Last time I saw he was sitting by the churn. He had butter all over his face" (Morrison, 1988, p. 50). Although Paul D escapes and lives to relate

Halle's story to Sethe, he, too, is implicated in Halle's sacrifice and his survival and sanity is not without its own price. When Sethe asks Paul D why he did not speak with Halle and try to bring him along, Paul D reveals the degree to which his sanity and soul are implicated in Halle's. He does not speak with Halle because he is as incapable of speech as Halle is, although for a different reason. His announcement - "I had a bit in my mouth" (Morrison, 1988, p.69) is as terrifying in its dehumanized ferocity as his account of Halle. Paul D, too, has participated in the dehumanizing of Halle, and is also, at the same time, made beastlike - like a horse, with a bit, hobbled - even though he has not been part of the contractual ritual with Schoolteacher. Like Halle, therefore, he is unable to speak, indicating a reduction to the animal state. But unlike Halle, his inability to speak is not a function of an entirely internalized animality; it is forced upon him by the bit in his mouth which both confers as well as signifies his status as animal. This distinction is crucial because, in retaining his sanity, Paul D is able to distance himself enough from his experiences to put them away into the tobacco tin. Thus, even though Paul D is not reduced entirely to the animal state in spite of being treated like one, he has been forced to set aside a critical part of his humanity, locked away in his tobacco tin.

The tobacco tin functions as a survival strategy insofar as it allows Paul D to retain some semblance of sanity and humanity, as long as he does not have to confront the experiences locked in it. Paul D has been able to reclaim himself from the 'wildness' that would mark the memory of his 'animalisation'. But as he points out to Sethe, like her 'journey', it, too, has come at a price. "There's a way to put it there," he says, "and there's a way to take it out and I haven't figured out yet which is worse" (Morrison, 1988, p.71).

Hence, the true significance of Sethe's violenced body is not fully revealed even in the telling of the event of violence to which it is witness: the hidden knowledge that Paul D., witness to Halle's dehumanisation, harbours within himself is not yet released, and will not be until it finds a physical home/body in Beloved's womb. In order to trace this process, let us look more closely at the episode in which Paul D and Beloved share some version of sexual intercourse in the shed outside Sethe's house.

The tobacco pouch (so closely associated with the metaphorical 'tobacco tin' of his heart but literally softer, more permeable) is almost the only material object associated with Paul D and it appears the first time Sethe begins introduces the narrative of the tree on her back, so central to the novel. "I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms. No more running - from nothing....I took one journey and I paid for the ticket and ... it cost too much!" ... Paul D fished in his vest for a little pouch of tobacco.... "What tree on your back?" (Morrison, 1988, p.15).

The next time the account of this critical episode of the past is raised, we see, not the tobacco pouch, but the tin. It appears in the context of the dehumanizing experience of being saddled and bound by the bit in the mouth as Paul D tries to explain to Sethe the depths of his dehumanization and the degree of his implication in the sacrifice of Halle. Paul D wants to tell Sethe more but “[she] ... stop[s] him. Just as well. ... Saying more might push them both to a place they couldn’t get back from. He would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be.” (Morrison, 1988, p.72-73). The tobacco tin, then, is what allows Paul D to distance and displace the experiences of dehumanization that threaten his sanity and humanity, his soul and self-worth. It is clear that the tobacco pouch is merely the material signifier of the metaphorical tin which is central to the encounter with Beloved.

The sexual intercourse between Paul D and Beloved becomes deeply symbolic when considered in this context, the manner in which Beloved sees the meaning of her own name and the way in which her wound and genitalia are introduced into the narrative. “Beloved let her head fall back on the edge of the bed while she found her breath and Denver saw the tip of the thing that she always saw in its entirety when Beloved undressed to sleep. Looking straight at it she whispered, ‘Why you call yourself Beloved?’ Beloved closed her eyes. ‘In the dark my name is Beloved’” (Morrison, 1988, p.74-75). The wound at her throat which is the fatal mark of her mother’s love, also marks Beloved as representative of the ‘sixty million and more’ to whom Morrison dedicates her book. But the scar of the open gash becomes, in the encounter with Paul D, emblematic of her genitalia, enabling Paul D to get to his own ‘inside part’ by touching hers.

When Beloved comes to Paul D in the shed, this is the connection she makes over and over. “I want you to touch me on the inside part and call my name” (Morrison, 1988, p.117). Morrison recalls the tobacco tin: “Paul D never worried about his little tobacco tin anymore. It was rusted shut” (Morrison, 1988, p.118). The unspoken mirroring of the closed gash in her throat in that of her genitalia, opened/touched by Paul D is mirrored again in the opening of the shut tobacco tin of Paul D’s ‘red heart’ as each seeks healing in the other.

Beloved has taken Paul D’s tobacco tin into herself - into her ‘inside part’ - and thus returned to him his ‘red heart’. The poison that Beloved has internalised and which her womb contains is, in this context and sense, the knowledge of Schoolteacher’s contract successfully completed. That this knowledge is seen as a sort of pregnancy is evident in Beloved’s reaction to the prospect of Sethe’s and Paul D’s child. She begins, literally, to disintegrate to fall apart. She pulls out a back tooth and thinks: “this is it. Next would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe

one at a time, maybe all at once. ... She would fly apart” (Morrison, 1988, p.133). Such a child would herald the beginning of the process of healing for which Paul D is now ready, having had his “red heart” restored to him, and for which Sethe is ready, having placed her tree in Paul D’s hands. Such a healing would neutralize the poison in Beloved’s womb, rendering her existence unnecessary. That Beloved is a fierce love that harbours the debilitating hatred, grief and anger of the “sixty million and more” becomes evident as her pregnancy progresses and she becomes a life-denying force, sucking the vitality out of Sethe and literally starving her as she herself grows bigger and bigger.

But the whole truth has not yet been revealed and the healing process cannot therefore be completed. As Sethe affirms the killing of Beloved, she is met by Paul D’s incomprehension; a lack of understanding that consigns her to the very animal status that Schoolteacher reduced Halle to and which Sethe has spent the rest of her life resisting. ““You got two feet, Sethe, not four””(Morrison, 1988, p.165), he tells her as he leaves, and it is evident that the process of healing and comprehension - both understanding as well as containment - is as yet incomplete.

There is, therefore, no longer any means of Sethe and Paul D producing the child that would have heralded the beginning of the time of healing, of replacing Beloved who would have flown apart (as she does at the end) - destroyed, exorcised - at this birth. The bitterness and the despair over the seemingly final end to any such hope for healing becomes the baby in Beloved’s body instead. The tobacco tin will not reform in Paul D’s chest but it will take a new life in Beloved’s womb and another exorcism will be needed before she will fly apart, taking the poison with her.

Check Your Progress:

What is the significance of the tobacco tin in this novel? How is the metaphor of the tobacco tin connected to the larger theme of violence? Explain briefly in your own words.

2.5 AMY TAN: *THE JOY LUCK CLUB*

Just as we used *Beloved* to explore how different kinds of violence require different kinds of narratives, each of which have specific consequences for the individual and collective identities constructed, let us now look at Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) to explore the specific ways in which the narrative of the Second World War works to construct immigrant identities. Immigrant identity construction deserves separate attention since the violence is typically not experienced by the narrator/protagonist and is inherited by the protagonist as a necessary adjunct to her home country. Our interest, in this discussion, is to establish the narrative links between the way in which the violence of the Second World War is treated especially with regard to women, and the female, immigrant identity that is ultimately constructed.

The Joy Luck Club, written by Asian-American writer Amy Tan, is the story of four Chinese women and their daughters. The mothers have immigrated from China to America under very different circumstances and from very different backgrounds in China. The daughters are mostly born in America and consider themselves American by birth but live also within a very traditional Chinese culture at home. The four pairs are different also in the relationships between the mothers and daughters and Amy Tan uses these stories to explore the many aspects of the immigrant experience in America and how the American born children discover and claim their Chinese roots. It would be helpful for you to read the novel in order to gain a better understanding of some of the issues discussed below.

The Joy Luck Club opens with two compelling narratives: the story of the swan and its remnant feather, and the story of Suyuan's experiences during the invasion of China by the Japanese concluding with her fleeing the bombing of Kweilin. Together, these form the critical positioning of the relationship of the daughters (in this case, Jing-mei) and their relationship with their mothers (in this context, Suyuan), inextricably bound with the violence of the Second World War.

The "old woman" who crosses "an ocean many thousands of li wide" to get from Shanghai to America brings with her a swan that she will gift to her daughter: a symbol of the hope and a bond so essential between mother and daughter that the daughter "will know [her mother's] meaning when she receives the swan - a creature that became much more than what was hoped for" (Tan, 1989, p.3). "But when she arrived in the new country, the immigration officials pulled her swan away from her, leaving the woman fluttering her arms with only one feather for a memory. And then she had to fill out so many forms she forgot why she had come and what she had left behind" (Tan, 1989, p. 3). Even this remnant of the whole swan does

not find its way to the daughter but remains a hope, a deferred desire, of the Chinese mother unable to speak the “perfect American English” that her daughter will understand.

The story works to bind together several crucial ideas: the hope for freedom and emancipation that drives the immigrant out of her own land towards an alien place; the deep seated desire to communicate this hope and desire to her daughters; the need to bring the home country to the American born child in some form that would be both material and symbolic. Most compellingly, perhaps, the swan, reduced to a feather, gives the sense of the fragility of language and its ability to convey ‘meaning’, especially the kind of meaning that is the very blood and bones of the connection between mother and daughter. While the feather holds out the remote possibility of communication, the loss of the swan itself is a powerful notation of the loss of both significance as well as the means of signification. For the mother leaving her homeland, the Immigration officer takes away her identity, her sense of herself, her connection with her homeland, the significance she derives from these and her means of communication when he takes away the swan. When the Chinese mother’s means of signification are replaced by the “forms” she must “fill in”, this new and alien means of signification both erases as well as overwrites the previous one. New ‘meaning’ is ascribed to prior information in the process of erasure and the immigrant mother is rendered mute until such time as she is able to master these new forms of signification (the ‘perfect American English’) and inhabit these new meanings. Thus, the feather becomes charged with both the hope as well as the futility of such a desire.

That the daughter is a native inhabitant of these new meanings and spaces, speaking in ‘perfect American English’ and has, in this sense, fulfilled the hope of her immigrant mother in being born in a world where “her worth is [not] measured by the loudness of her husband’s belch” (Tan, 1989, p.3) serves, in fact, to sever the connection between mother and daughter rather than strengthen it. The swan which would have ensured and been the material manifestation of this connection is lost in the act of immigration. Amy Tan’s novel is an exercise in reforging that connection, a kind of literary and textual swan that will bring the stories of mother and daughter back to each other in something other than the pristine Chinese of the mothers or the ‘perfect American English’ of the daughters. More than the finding of a common language between Jing-mei and her dead mother Suyuan, however, (since much of the English text is actually translated Chinese, mostly in the speech of the mothers) the swan/novel is constructed from the violence and urgencies of the home that Suyuan was forced to flee. Tan begins her novel by twinning these two narratives: the myth or folk tale of the swan (which serves as a prologue to all four pairs of narratives) and the bombing of Kweilin that immediately follows it. That

Jing-mei had always thought of this historical event as ‘nothing but a Chinese fairy tale’ underlines the connection between these two narratives. In this reading of *The Joy Luck Club* we will see the manner in which these two narratives together function as the swans’ feather, constructing between them the sense of identity and home lost to both mothers and daughters in the act of immigration.

The originary event of violence can clearly be identified as the bombing of Kweilin from which Suyuan flees, leaving her two baby girls on the road. It is to this experience that her daughter, Jing-mei, must return, to experience both her participation as well as her separation from the violence which expelled her mother from her homeland. As the novel opens with the death of her mother, Jing-mei hears this story as the narrative of the secret life or key to the life of her mother; so powerful is its impact, that once the story is narrated, it renders any understanding of her mother’s identity impossible in its absence. It becomes, in other words, the originary or foundational narrative of her mother’s life/identity. Narrated by the American born daughter, Jing-mei, the graphic description of the violence of the Second World War is distanced by the bracketing strategies of the opening scene introducing the death of Suyuan and the introduction of her first person narrative as “her Kweilin story”, “a story she would always tell [Jing-mei] when she was bored” (Tan, 1989, p. 7). This “story” is briefly interrupted in the middle by Jing-mei’s voice which reiterates its nature as “nothing but a Chinese fairy tale” which was rendered all the more unreal by the unstable narrative. “The endings always changed....The story always grew and grew” (Tan, 1989, p.12) until one day Suyuan tells her daughter “a completely different ending to the story” (Tan, 1989, p.13).

The end of Suyuan’s ‘story’ is punctuated by a double displacement of her daughter who finds that she has no place either in the story of her sisters, or of her mother. “Stunned to realize that the story had been true all along”, Jing-mei is told by her mother that she is “not those babies” who had been left by her by the roadside in the midst of the war. There is no way for Jing-mei to find herself in or through this story because this statement, Jing-mei says, “[makes] it clear that there was no more to the story” (Tan, 1989, p.15). The second displacement occurs immediately after in the following section of the Mah Jong game with the remaining three Chinese mothers where Jing-mei both expects as well as recognizes the impossibility of these Chinese women ever accepting her in her mother’s place. As she enters, Jing-mei thinks how “they must wonder now how someone like me can take my mother’s place.” She remembers her mother being insulted by some attributed similarities between the two, saying “You don’t even know little percent of me! How can you be me?” And this statement of irreconcilable difference is acknowledged by Jing-mei: “and she’s right. How can I be my mother at Joy Luck?” (Tan, 1989, p.15). This

is a necessary admission of the chasm separating her from her mother and therefore from her past, from China, from her owning of a history which will give to her both a literal family as well as a sense of belonging and membership within a collective identity. Even before the Chinese mothers reveal to Jing-mei the existence of her half sisters and send her on her journey of dis/recovery, she has already begun to assimilate the reality of the events at Kweilin. Even if she was “not those babies”, the feast at the Joy Luck Club is recognized as being “just like ... the Kweilin feasts” (Tan, 1989, p.20). But the reality of the violence that both separated her from her sisters as well as made her own existence possible remains bracketed off as ‘story’, and it is not until she dis/recovers these living sisters that Jing-mei will be reconciled with it and with her own identity. It is almost as if she, too, is abandoned by the roadside, “screaming to be reclaimed.”

It is important, therefore, to recognize the graphic manner of the description of this violence in a text in which all violence is rendered obliquely. In her account of the Japanese invasion of China, Suyuan is, in fact, particularly attentive to the details of the effects of war in every conceivable aspect of city and human life. Thus, even before we see the Japanese or hear of their actual atrocities, we see the cities fill with refugees fleeing from them. Suyuan recounts with wonder the manner in which social and economic classes, among other divisions, are sundered and rendered meaningless by the violence of the war. “Every day, every hour, thousands of people poured into the city They came from the East, West, North and South” (Tan, 1989, p.8). The bizarre nature of this social upheaval is evident in Suyuan’s account. “We were a city of leftovers mixed together. If it hadn’t been for the Japanese, there would have been plenty of reason for fighting to break out among these different people. Can you see it?” (Tan, 1989, p.8). Even the disease and homelessness and squalor did not make for tolerance or an acknowledgement of the shared human condition. As “Kweilin [loses] its beauty” for Suyuan, the account turns to the manner in which the bombings turned the hills into hiding places for the Japanese, her home into a place of “dark corners”, the city a place of “sirens [that] cried out to warn [them] of bombers” and the caves a place for the “wild animals” that the people who hid there felt they had become (Tan, 1989, p.9). The human person, stripped of her social, economic, physical and even human attributes, is reduced to nothingness. Driven, symbolically, into the ‘bowels of an ancient hill’, these are people who can be seen as being pushed back into the womb, to a point of non or pre-existence. “Can you imagine how it is, to want to be neither inside nor outside, to want to be nowhere and disappear?” (Tan, 1989, p. 9). Thus, when the sounds of bombing faded, they emerged like “newborn kittens scratching” their way back to consciousness and the living (Tan, 1989, p. 9).

The Joy Luck Club comes as a response to a very specific need. “At all hours of the night and day [Suyuan can hear] screaming sounds. I didn’t know if a peasant was slitting the throat of a runaway pig or an officer beating a half-dead peasant for lying in his way on the sidewalk.... And that’s when I thought I needed something to help me move on” (Tan, 1989, p.10). Even at the cost of being thought to be ‘possessed by demons’, the women of the Joy Luck Club meet every week to celebrate the possibility of joy and luck and to keep alive the hope that some day these will enter their lives.

Check Your Progress:

i) *What are the two narratives coupled together by Amy Tan to tell this story?*

ii) *Why does she do so?*

2.6 ISABEL ALLENDE: *THE HOUSE OF SPIRITS*

The last text we will discuss in this Unit is Isabel Allende's *The House of Spirits* published in 1985. Here, we will attempt to trace the ways in which State violence is understood and narrativised by the resistance movements that it engenders, and the nature of the collective identity (usually national rather than racial) that the movement constructs. While we will see, in detail, the specific nature of the Chilean resistance movement against the Pinochet regime, we will also trace the nature of what can be called the contract between the rebel and the State torturer.

House of Spirits by Isabel Allende tells the story of three generations of women living before and during the Pinochet regime in Chile. The three women - Clara, Bianca and Alba - live through an age of social and political change, from feudal Chile to Chile under the violent dictatorship of General Pinochet. Allende uses each woman's story to discuss the meaning of love and relationships, rebellion and compromise, nationhood and patriotism. The figure of Trueba - the feudal landlord who goes from supporting the regime to opposing it - ties all three women together, while the three Garcias symbolize the many faces of violence in society.

The process of the reduction of the individual to pure body - or thing - affects Alba well before she is physically taken to the torture chambers. It begins with the destruction of everything that is personal to her as well as to Jaime, as Miguel calls asking her to not call or try to contact him, not to speak of him, or to him, to anyone, nor even to contact any of her friends (Allende, 1985, p. 424). This severance from her loved ones and the destruction of all her personal things is the beginning of the dehumanisation the State imposes. However, it is also the depersonalisation required of the rebel and, as such, one of the first conflicts the rebel must resolve: how to depersonalise herself and her cause without dehumanising either. For Alba, therefore, the process of destroying her personal effects is also the process of divesting herself of all that marks her as a unique person; so that by the time she is tortured, she is reduced to 'rebel'. The process is a crucial one in that therein lies the danger of being objectified into 'body' - or 'thing', as Alba's own perception of herself as 'raw meat,' after the torture, shows. At the same time, the State requires a similar dehumanisation of its own functionaries. Thus, the soldiers, also, are dehumanised into killing machines, characterised by "the blind obedience, the use of arms and other skills that soldiers can master once they silence the scruples of their hearts" (Allende, 1985, p.436). Indeed, Allende invests great poignancy in the few instances of those who resist this dehumanisation, such as the soldier who offers Jaime a cigarette, claiming Jaime had saved his mother's life, or the few who show some kindness to Alba and the other prisoners later.

This destruction of the personal effects of individuals is also part of the State's attempt to destroy any trace of the Chile of the rebels - whether it be cultural, political or merely traditional. Anything which the rebels or even the average citizenry could use as symbols of the old Chile, a Chile prior to the regime, around which they could formulate a Chile alternative to the one being constructed by the new regime, is destroyed. This destruction is effected, characteristically, through violence, which destroys not just materials, but, more importantly, significance and meaning. It is here that the almost epic list of books burnt appears, foretold several times in the course of the book. Even here, it is described in historical terms as "an infamous pyre" (Allende, 1985, p. 456) (where 'pyre' carries the weight both of barbaric ritual as well as of the death and ceremonious ending of a living, almost sacred thing) and "a scandalous bonfire" so that its historical resonance and importance is given in no uncertain terms. All that was good and valuable about the old Chile and the old culture - all that the regime seeks to destroy - is signified by these books of magic, medicine and philosophy, and of course, "a leather bound set of the complete works of Marx;" works of art, "bibelots" and even Trueba's "opera scores", and "his classical records" (Allende, 1985, p.456). Thus, even the landowning and self-sufficient Trueba is put in a position where he must maintain a "precarious stability" after the violence of the regime has brought into being a world in which "the line between what was good and what was bad had been blurred" (Allende, 1985, p.453-54).

The success of this destruction of material and meaning is seen as Alba tries to remember a world and a time "before the hurricane of events had turned the world upside down, when things were still called by familiar names and words, had a single meaning" (Allende, 1985, p.460). She thinks of Miguel, their love making and the feeling of security and timelessness, but the sounds of people being tortured "the screams, the long moans" destroy not only her reverie but even her ability to remember the life before the violence. "The woods, Miguel and love were lost in the deep well of her terror and she resigned herself to facing her fate without subterfuge" (Allende, 1985, p.461). Violence changes and destroys reality as we know it. Even before the violence is visited upon her own body, Alba has felt its ability to rearrange and reorganize the boundaries and limits of human experience and life. "After that terrible Tuesday, Alba had to rearrange her feelings in order to continue living.... She felt that everything was made of glass, as fragile as a sigh, and that the machine-gun fire and bombs of that unforgettable Tuesday had destroyed most of what she knew, and that all the rest had been smashed to pieces and spattered with blood" (Allende, 1985, p. 430).

Denial, the natural response to the destruction of the old as well as the presence of the new reality, signals the next stage. As the guards beat and

rape her, Alba is reduced to “a monumental no ...until she could no longer think, could only say no, no and no” (Allende, 1985, p. 462). At this stage, she can still “calculate how much longer she could resist before her strength gave out” but this is only because the full enormity of her situation has not hit her and she does “not [know] that this [is] only the beginning” (Allende, 1985, p.462). Denial is followed by withdrawal, and “tortured by the pain ... and the terror” she “curls up like a fetus” (Allende, 1985, p. 463). Such withdrawal can be seen as an extreme form of denial, but nevertheless, it seems to be the end of the phase which began with the destruction of everything that made her an individual (her books, personal things, anything which would betray her thoughts or life): of the divesting herself of her self-hood.

As the violence begins to destroy not only the past but also her sense of the present, “her loneliness, the darkness and her fear distorted her sense of time and space. She thought she saw caves filled with monsters.... She decided to forget everything she knew, even Miguel’s name” (Allende, 1985, p. 463-64). At this point, the violence has seeped through her body into her mind, her sense of her material self is being steadily eroded along with her idealism. Thus, “the third time they took her in to Esteban Garcia ... she had no illusions. She did not even try to evoke the woods where she had shared the joy of love” (Allende, 1985, p. 464). The loss of illusions about her ability to resist brings her then to the depths of despair. The loss of illusion is next only to the loss of hope, which is then inevitable. This is not an incentive to live, and so she reaches the logical conclusion of this phase, which is despair: when Garcia lets her go for a little while “she [uses] [the short break] to invoke the understanding spirits of her grandmother, so that they would help her die. But no-one answered her call for help” (Allende, 1985, p. 464).

It is at this point that the person becomes what, according to Mark Ledbetter, it is always in danger of: it becomes ‘thing’. Once Alba is given electric shocks, she becomes pure body. Not in the way in which pleasure induces the body to celebrate its sensuality, but in the manner in which only pain can reduce it to pure materiality. “Then she felt the atrocious pain that coursed through her body, filling it completely, and that she would never forget as long as she lived. She sank into darkness” (Allende, 1985, p. 465). When she awakes, she is, therefore, naked. She has no memory. “She could not move, recalled nothing, had no idea where she was or what had caused the intense pain which had reduced her to a heap of raw meat” (Allende, 1985, p. 465).

This is, then, the lowest point to which the human spirit can sink and, it is here, therefore, that we hear a muted but clear reference to Christ on the Cross: “she felt the thirst of the Sahara and called out for water”

(Allende, 1985, p. 466). Because Allende distinguishes the violence of State torture from all other kinds (both feudal and the 'casual' violence embedded in the fabric of everyday living) as well as from all other narratives, it is important, here, to consider whether Allende is not resorting to pre-existing narratives for the violenced body in her invocation of the religious symbol of Christ on the Cross. Appearing at the point at which the body/person loses all meaning, this is a traditional and relatively simple way of reinvesting the body with signification and the person with relevance. The answer is not simple. It is, of course, clear that the narrative of the violenced body as sacred and the person as martyr or sacrificial lamb is pivotal to Alba's survival and understanding of self and community.

That this is a pre-existing narrative is also beyond doubt. However, a couple of things need to be taken into account here. One, the rebel's ideology is, as we have seen, suffused with this vision; it is, necessarily, a quasi-religious one. Two, the power of the violenced body emanates precisely from its loss of meaning, and its ability to signify both 'nothingness' as well as anything, and the religious is not the only meaning it acquires in the text. For Esteban Garcia, for instance, the seduction of torture comes precisely from the violenced body's ability to lend itself to any number of contexts. The inventiveness of his techniques and methods derive their inspiration from everything: from revenge (literally stripping Alba of all that signifies her social class and dignity, such as her clothes), the perversion of desire (molesting her when she was a child, and later raping her), revulsion of the senses (plunging her head into a bucket of excrement), simple pain (the electric shocks), and the sheer expression of power (the beatings). It is important to remember this violence is carried out either by Esteban Garcia, or under his supervision, and that violence, in his context, has already been defined by its meaninglessness (the clutching of the three fingers and the knocking of nails into the chickens' and his grandfather's eyes). For the purposes of the State, the violenced body is an index to the loss of power and validity of the rebel and her vision. Simultaneously, it is a validation and imposition of the reality of the State as against that of the rebel. For the resistance movement, as we shall see, each wound, mutilation, dismemberment is a realisation of a vision; each disappeared body or person, its valourisation. Upon this realisation and valourisation, the resistance constructs its notion of the country.

Finally, it is important to note the specific process through which the body acquires this religious narrative, and how this narrative is modified by it. The electric shock episode underscores the suggestion that the body has its own memory and therefore the marking of the body in acts of violence - especially torture - has a peculiarly potent power. Thus, although she cannot see him, the memory of "the howl" of the man whose legs are run over by a truck as punishment "[stays] in her memory forever" (Allende,

1985, p. 465). It is precisely this sharing in the pain of others which marks the movement up and out of the depths of despair for her mind, and redeems her body from its “thingness”. The process of ‘redemption’, then, is effected largely through the feeling of community, of unity with fellow sufferers. Thus, Ana Diaz is the first to call Alba *companero*. Moreover, the language of religion is not employed by Allende, herself, other than the oblique reference to Christ on the Cross. Rather, it springs as analogy to the reader’s mind in a section which is noteworthy for its lack of metaphorical language.

The healing that is so essential to the spirit of the individual as well as of the collective begins only after this point. Alba begins to record the sufferings of others that she sees around her, and by the time she is released, she has helped herself to begin the process of rejuvenation both for herself as well as for the community of women, first, and then the larger collective of the Chilean people. We can see, here, that just as the breaking down of the individual is carried out by the State in order to break the spirit of the community form which she comes and which she represents, the healing, too, binds the individual with the collective.

Check Your Progress:

i) *Can you list the different kinds of events of violence we have studied in this Unit?*

ii) *What are some of the differences that you can see between these kinds of violence?*

2.7 LET US SUM UP

We have performed, in this Unit, a very close reading of three different postmodern texts, each of which is concerned with the problem of how to talk about different kinds of violence. In doing so, the authors must confront what it means to have a collective identity that is founded on these events of violence, often in order to face social, personal and philosophical evils that beset that particular society. In the process of narrating these events, we find these authors using very similar strategies, and we are able to connect these with the kinds of violence that the authors chronicle. Although the authors we have chosen are all from different countries or nationalities and write about different kinds of violence, we see that these strategies are common to them all. This creates what we have identified as a unique sub genre, dealing with issues of gendered violence, within the larger genre of contemporary life narratives.

2.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) How do the different authors relate to events of violence in terms of distance or involvement? Discuss.
- 2) Are you equally comfortable with each collective identity that is constructed by the individual writers discussed in this Unit? For instance, is the construction of China the same for Tan and Kingston? Explain.
- 3) Does the strategy of magic realism or fantasy make it easier or more difficult to understand the emotional impact of this violence? Justify with examples.
- 4) How does the fact that the writers are all women affect your reading of the text? Would a male writer have written differently, or focused on different issues? Justify your response.
- 5) Do you feel that the element of magic realism especially towards the end of the novels adds a touch of hope? Or do you think that this is an escapist way to end the novel? Argue for either position with the help of examples from the texts.

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2.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 3 RE-COVERING THE BODY

Syeda Semim Zahan and Anu Aneja

Structure

- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Objectives
- 3.3 The Veil in South Asia
 - 3.3.1 Veiling in India
 - 3.3.2 Veil in Indian Women's Life Narratives and Film
 - 3.3.3 Veiling in Life Narratives from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh
 - 3.3.3.1 Afghanistan
 - 3.3.3.2 Pakistan
 - 3.3.3.3 Bangladesh
- 3.4 The Veil in Middle Eastern and North African Life Narratives
 - 3.4.1 Socio-Political History of Iran and Veiling
 - 3.4.2 The Veil in the Writings of Iranian Women
 - 3.4.3 The Veil in Life Narratives from Morocco
- 3.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.6 Unit End Questions
- 3.7 References
- 3.8 Suggested Readings

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit we will learn about the origin of the custom of veiling in various countries from South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. By examining specific literary works from countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Iran and Morocco, we will examine how the veil works as a contested space, and how it is embedded in identity politics. We will also discuss how the veil acts as a metaphor in women's life writing. Many women in their life narratives talk about the veil and how it has been used through the ages to subjugate women both literally and metaphorically. We will see how short-story writers, poets and filmmakers use the veil as a metaphor to reveal women's degradation in society. At the same time, through the power of their literary skills, they give expression to women's resistance against oppression in an attempt to 're-cover' the female body and shape it anew.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- Explain the origin of the veil in different cultures and countries;
- Discuss how the veil has acted as a contested space in the politics of different countries;
- Examine the issues of veiling in women's life writings from South Asia, Middle East and North Africa; and
- Describe the use of the veil as a metaphor in these writings.

3.3 THE VEIL IN SOUTH ASIA

In this section, we will examine some specific literary works in which the veil plays an important role, against a historical and cultural background. Starting with India, we will then turn to some works from neighboring South Asian countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. Through our reading of life narratives by women writers from these countries, we will see how veiling has been both a cultural tool of oppression against women, as well as a literary tool used by women writers to contest their subjugation.

3.3.1 Veiling in India

The veil in India was prevalent only among the women of the higher strata of society. The poorer women could not afford to cover their faces because they had to come out into the open for work. We have evidence of this in the ancient texts like the *Abhigyanam Shakuntalam* by Kalidasa. The origin of this institution can be traced to the ideal of social prestige which introduced seclusion amongst royal families as also the element of possessiveness among the males of the aristocracy. Women covered their faces from their in-laws and elders as a sign of respect. Women were often regarded as the repositories of honour. Women of the royalty were not to come out into the public. The custom of veil was not only about covering the face but also about maintaining certain decorum such as not talking to strangers especially men, not standing in the doorways, and not looking out of windows.

After the Independence of India, many women came out of the veil and joined the movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. With the formation of the Progressive Writer's Association, many women writers emerged, including Rasheed Jehan, Ismat Chughtai, Usha Dutt, Razia Sajjad Zaheer, Arpita Das, Shelia Bhatia, Binata Roy, Uma Chakravorty, Sarojini Naidu and so on.

Rasheed Jehan's story 'Woh' included in the volume *Women Writing in India* (1991) edited by K. Lalita and Susie Tharu, shows the crumbling of the secure world of a young upper-middle class woman when she confronts the world of the 'other one', a prostitute. Such writings by women urge the modern middle class woman to come out of her comfort zone and face the realities of other worlds, such as that of the working class woman, or the woman who is forced to survive by selling her body.

By the late sixties, gaps in the Nehruvian Mixed economy showed up. Peasants' revolts emerged in different parts of the country supported by students who left the universities to support the farmers. In Bengal, Bihar and Kerala riots broke up over food shortages. Women who had been silent on the political front after Independence, took active roles in these movements and demanded that women's questions be included in their agendas, and formed women's organizations. Writers of the fifties and the sixties are formally accomplished writers. Kamal Desai, Krishna Sobti, Sajda Zaidi, Qurratulain Hyder, Kabita Sinha, Madhavikutty, Gauri Deshpande and Anita Desai were a few of them. During the 1970's, with decentralization and the coming of age of India's capitalism, the internationalization of markets and new concerns came up. Writers like Mahasweta Devi have been writing extensively on issues of tribal rights and the ill effects of a free economy under capitalism.

3.3.2 The Veil in Indian Women's Life Narratives and Film

We have many instances of the use of the veil as a metaphor in Indian women's life narratives. For instance, Rama Mehta's novel *Inside the Haveli* (1977) talks about a liberated and educated young woman Geeta who, following her marriage into a very traditional family in Udaipur, enters the *haveli* as a bride. Spanning a period of fifteen years, the book traces the accommodation of Geeta to the ways of the *haveli*. The women she meets inside the *haveli* never leave the *haveli*'s enclosed walls except for a chat with the other women in the other *havelis*. They spend their time cooking, buying saris and wearing them to social gatherings, overseeing endless servants and gossiping. In the midst of all this noise, Geeta longs for a moment of solitude. She also wishes to educate the children of the maids, thus going against the norms of the day and indicating the *haveli*'s decline.

The setting of the movie *Water* by Deepa Mehta is the India of the 1930s. When the protagonist's husband dies, she becomes a burden to the family. Deepa Mehta exposes the ills of the practice of child marriage which was still the order of the day. Widows lived in ashrams, in close confinement and in austerity, and sometimes even prostituted. In this case, Chuiya, a child widow, is left in an ashram by her father after her husband's death. She has been unable to understand why she was being left there. Chuiya

befriends everyone in the ashram with the vitality of a child; flitting from room to room she discovers a new world in each woman. Outside, the sacred river Ganges flows indifferent, symbolizing a society which pays little concern to the plight of these women. But change is in the air. A young man takes notice of Kalyani, the beautiful widow, and wishes to marry her. Tough change is in the air, the ashram faces a tragedy when Kalyani has to go for prostitution, her client being the father of the young man who wishes to marry her. Chuiya too meets a terrible end.

We have seen through these examples how the veil has been playing a pivotal role in the lives of Indian women since ancient times and how the scene is not changing even in contemporary times. However, writers, film makers and social activists have been trying their best to address the issue through their works.

Ismat Chughtai

Next, let us look at one specific example of a writer whose use of the veil as a metaphor in her literary writing gained her much fame. In a previous Unit of this programme (see MWG 001, Block 6, Unit 2) you have already come across a discussion of the well-known short story, “Lihaaf” (“The Quilt”) by Ismat Chughtai (1994). The story is also examined in the next Block of this course (Block 4, Unit 4) from the perspective of queer life narratives. As you will observe, in this story, the veil is used as a metaphor which both conceals and reveals women’s sexual desires in a repressive society. Here, let us look at another short story by the same author in which the veil is employed as a central image.

In another one of her short stories from the same collection, entitled “**The Veil**”, Ismat Chughtai describes the fate of Goribi, an eighty year old virgin. Written in the voice of a first person narrator, the short story describes the tragic fate of Goribi who gets engaged at the young age of fourteen to Kale Mian, the narrator’s uncle. In a culture which prizes ‘fairness,’ and denigrates people with dark skin, Goribi’s seventeen year old husband who is “unusually sensitive about his inky complexion” (Chughtai, 1994, p. 1), finds himself so overwhelmed by his young bride’s legendary beauty that he is unable to lift the veil from her face on his wedding night. Weighed down by the burden of a tradition in which the bride is too ashamed to lift her own veil, both of the newlyweds remain frozen and incapacitated to take charge of their entangled destinies. Despite the husband’s repeated commands to his wife to lift her veil, Goribi finds herself unable to do so, forcing her Kale Mian to interpret her refusal as an arrogant defiance (Chughtai, 1994, p. 1). Some years later, when Goribi is a young woman of twenty one, the scene is repeated under the watchful encouragement of family members, all of whom are waiting for the marriage to be consummated. However,

Goribi's misplaced sense of honour and shame, and her husband's deep-seated insecurities, once more prevent the happy beginning of a married life to which both of them are secretly looking forward. As before, Goribi's husband literally jumps out of the marital home by leaping out of the window and disappears from her life for the next thirty years. The scene which follows, at the end of the story, marks the tragic end to two lives crushed under societal repression - the husband dies due to diseases acquired from living a life of debauchery, while Goribi replaces her wedding veil with the shroud of a widow. An excerpt from the ending of the story is provided below:

After leading a life of indiscriminate debauchery, Kale Mian had returned home burdened with disease. On his deathbed he requested that Goribi come to him so that he could die in peace.

When she received Kale Mian's message, Goribi leaned against a pillar for a long time, unmoving and silent. Then, going to her old trunk, she took out her tattered wedding suit and put it on, applied bridal oil to some of her grey hair and, her long veil cradled between her hands, she arrived at the side of the dying patient.

"Lift your veil," Kale Main whispered convulsively.

Goribi's trembling hands reached up toward her veil, and fell.

Kale Mian had taken his last breath.

That very moment Goribi calmly sat down on the floor beside his bed, smashed her glass bangles against the bedpost, and instead of the bridal veil, pulled the white veil of widowhood over her head.

(Chughtai, 1994, p. 4)

Ismat Chughtai approaches the subjects of her narratives with a feminist empathy towards both female and male characters, who are chained down by the symbolic veiling imposed upon their individual aspirations for love, sexuality and emotional fulfillment. At the same time, as you can see from her stories, she uses a satirical and critical style to mock the social mores of societies which use 'tradition' as a burial shroud under which women and men die slow deaths. In order to obtain a deeper familiarity with Ismat Chughtai's use of the veil as a metaphor in life narratives, you are encouraged to read some of her other stories from her collection *The Quilt and Other Stories* (1994).

Check Your Progress:

Discuss how and why the custom of veil was prevalent in India in old times? Do you see any changes in this practice in recent times? Name some women writers who have been associated with such changes.

Activity:

Read “The Veil” and “Lihaaf” (“The Quilt”) by Ismat Chughtai and describe in your own words, her use of the veil as a literary tool in these short stories.

3.3.3 Veiling in Life Narratives from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh

Above, we have examined the use of the veil in life narratives from India. Now, let us look at the literary representation of veiling in the context of some other South Asian countries. We will begin with Afghanistan and then turn to two other neighbouring countries, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

3.3.3.1 Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, more than anywhere else in the world, women along with their men believe that they belong to the house, that they should not be seen by the outside world and hence should be veiled. The Taliban banned women from attending schools or hold up any job. Many women have been brutally murdered who were believed to have flouted the rules penned down by the Taliban.

Zoya's Story: An Afghan Woman's Struggle for Freedom

In the book *Zoya's Story: An Afghan Woman's Struggle for Freedom*, Zoya is an eye witness to the horrors the Taliban spread all over Afghanistan. The story begins with her encounter with a Russian lady soldier. Then she describes her mother, a liberal and educated woman who goes to the university and who first introduced her to the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan. She also adores her father who taught her to fly kites and the Persian language. Zoya was devastated when her parents were kidnapped and killed by the warlords one after the other. Zoya eloped to Quetta with her grandmother who used to spinning tales out of the biology and chemistry books of her father where she meets a Russian journalist and her name was changed to Zoya after the daughter of the journalist who happened to die of cancer. At sixteen she joined RAWA and started writing articles for their journal. When the Taliban took power in 1996 women were ordered to wear veils in the streets. They could go out only with a male relative. Women were banned from working or to go to schools. Zoya returned to Kabul to write about the atrocities of the Taliban against women. She also wrote about the women in refugee camps in Peshawar where she ran a school for the girls. She describes how difficult to convince the fathers of these girls to send their daughter to the school who would rather engage them in carpet-weaving.

3.3.3.2 Pakistan

We Sinful Women

Urdu poetry, with its well-established and world famous forms such as the *ghazal*, is part of a long literary tradition in South Asia, especially in Pakistan and India. Although traditionally dominated by male poets, some of whom gained so much fame that they became household names in these

countries (for instance, Mir, Ghalib and Faiz, among many others), the tradition of Urdu poetry has also provided a platform for women poets to explore the different forms, experiment with these forms, and give expression to ideas and feelings which capture the lives lived by women in these cultures. Since the veil, or *purdah*, is commonly observed by many women in Pakistan, we often find it appearing as a recurring motif in verse written by women poets. In contemporary Pakistan, some of the well-known poets such as Kishwar Naheed, Ishrat Aafreen and Fahmida Riaz, have turned to the metaphor of the veil to express their resistance to, and struggle against, social customs which they deem to be oppressive. In a collection entitled ***We Sinful Women*** (1991), **Rukhsana Ahmad** (who is the editor and the translator of the collection), brought together many of these well-known poets and provided a bilingual edition of some of the most startling poems penned by these women. With the original poems written in Urdu presented on the left side pages, and the English translations on facing pages, the collection provides us with a rich treasury of verse by contemporary Pakistani women, and a window into the literary world created by them.

Let us look at a few examples from this collection (you are encouraged to read the rest of the poems on your own in order to get a broader perspective on the variety of themes and styles used by the poets).

Here is an excerpt from the poem “Chadur and Diwari” by **Fahmida Riaz**:

Sire! What is this black *chadur* to me?

A thousand mercies, why do you reward me with this?

I am not in mourning that I should wear this
To flag my grief to the world
I am not a sinner, nor a criminal,
That I should stamp my forehead with its darkness
...

Sire, do be so kind

Do not give me this black *chadur*

With this black *chadur* cover the shroudless body lying
in your chamber

For the stench that emanates from that body

Walks huffed and breathless in every alleyway

Bangs her head on every door frame

Covering her nakedness

...

Not I, but you need this *chadur* now

...

These four walls, this *chadur* I wish upon the rotting carcass
In the open air, her sails flapping, my ship races ahead
I am the companion of the new Adam
Who has earned my self-assured love.

(Fahmida Riaz cited in Rukhsana Ahmad, 1988, p. 91)

As is evident from the above poem, the *chadur* or veil with which the female narrator of Fahmida Riaz's poem is forced to cover her body, is perceived by her as a *diwari*, a prison-wall within the confines of which she is forced to suffocate and die. But rather than suffering in silence, the narrator of the poem expresses bold resistance against patriarchal oppression by claiming that it is no longer she who needs this *chadur*. Rather, it is the patriarchal male who needs to use it to cover the decaying and rotting body lying in his chamber - that of the carcass of womanhood. In comparison to this rotting carcass, the poet imagines herself as a free spirit, "her sails flapping" forging ahead on a ship in the ocean of freedom (Riaz cited in Ahmad, 1988, p. 91).

We can find a similar resistance against the corporeal and spiritual oppression of veiling in many of the other poems in this collection of Urdu poetry. **Ishrat Aafreen**, for instance, in her poem "Migration" speaks of a "silken girl from the tribe of Stones" who has "imprisoned herself in the towers of tradition/ In a charmed palace of self-deception" (Aafreen in Ahmad, 1988, p. 147). In one of her *ghazals*, she similarly describes a veiled persona who is hidden inside her body, and who seeks liberation: "Hidden inside me lives this delicate girl/ Strange aspect, strange passions she has, this girl" (Aafreen cited in Ahmad, 1988, p. 167).

In the title poem of the collection, "We Sinful Women", **Kishwar Naheed** draws sharp contrasts between the bold and courageous women who are seen as 'sinful' because of their open resistance to patriarchy, and those who wear the 'gowns' of authority and see themselves as the keepers of tradition. With the sharpness of her literary skills, Naheed tears to shreds the veils of hypocrisy beneath which patriarchal forces hide themselves, to proudly declare -

It is we sinful women
who are not awed by the grandeur of those who wear gowns
who don't sell our lives
who don't bow our heads
who don't fold our hands together.
(Naheed cited in Ahmad, 1988, p. 31)

The excerpts provided for you above are only a small fragment of the many treasures you will find in this collection, and elsewhere in other poems by contemporary Pakistani women poets. Slowly, but surely, these poets have carved out for themselves, and for all women, a distinct space in the literary canon of Urdu poetry, conventionally defined and reigned over by male voices. In the words of the Rukhsana Ahmad, the editor of the collection we have discussed, “the self-appointed arbiters of taste are still men. They define the literary canons, build or wreck reputations, and, by largely ignoring women’s writing, marginalise it” (Ahmad, 1988, p. 6). The verse of the Pakistani women poets is clear evidence of the transformation of the Urdu literary canon and the unveiling of brave, new voices by women who are countering patriarchal oppression.

3.3.3.3 Bangladesh

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) was born in a small village in the Rangpur district of what is present day Bangladesh. Her father was a well educated landlord who encouraged all of his children to be well-versed in languages, especially the ‘elite’ languages of the time - Persian and Arabic. Rokeya Hossain, like many young Muslim girls of the time, got married at the early age of sixteen. Her husband, an educated man himself, encouraged her to study and read and write in Bengali, which was the language of the common people. Her first essay, “*Pipasa*”, written in Bengali, was published in 1902. This was followed by various other short stories and novels, which established her as a leading feminist writer of the early 20th century. Her writings, including *Sultana’s Dream* (originally published in 1905), clearly show her to be someone who had firm beliefs in the value of education as a way of promoting gender equality. After her husband’s death in 1909, she established a high school for girls in his memory. The school provided education to many young girls and remains a popular educational institution till date. Hossain’s interest and efforts towards promoting education, science and knowledge amongst young girls for the purpose of promoting gender equality, her own writings, and her involvement in women’s rights issues established her as a notable Muslim feminist writer and social worker. Working from within the Islamic tradition, Rokeya Hossain called for social reforms for women’s emancipation, especially from practices such as *purdah* and the isolation that women faced in the *zenana*. These beliefs are most evident in her short story, “*Sultana’s Dream*” which we will discuss below.

“*Sultana’s Dream*”

This short story, originally published in 1905 (available in English translation, 1988 edition), is one of the earliest feminist utopias. In the story, which is constructed in the form of a dream, the first person narrator is seen as lounging on an easy chair when she falls asleep and is visited (most likely in her dream) by a noble lady, Sister Sara. Sister Sara invites the narrator

to take a long, pleasurable walk with her through a town where the narrator finds that all the common social norms that she associates with women have been reversed. In this idealistic setting, women run their lives and their world, and men are secluded in an ironical twist to the practice of *purdah*. Education, freedom and a rational use of scientific technology enable women tap solar power to establish an ecologically sound society in which they live without fear of men or criminals.

Rather than women, here the men are isolated in the *mardana* area. As explained by Sister Sara to the incredulous narrator, “Now that they are accustomed to the *purdah* system and have ceased to grumble at their seclusion, we call the system *mardana* instead of *zenana*” (Hossain, 1988, p. 14). The irony of Sister Sara’s words can be lost on no reader since in a social system which normalizes veiling, it is women who tend to get ‘accustomed’ to their unnatural seclusion, and having internalized their oppression, stop complaining about it or seeing it as anything out of the ordinary. The conversation between the two main characters on this subject is very revealing:

“Where are the men”, I asked her.

“In their proper places, where they ought to be.”

“Pray let me know what you mean by ‘their proper places’.”

“Oh, I see my mistake, you cannot know our customs, as you were never here before. We shut our men indoors.”

“Just as we are kept in the *zenana*?”

“Exactly so.”

“How funny.” I burst into a laugh. Sister Sara laughed too.

(Hossain, 1988, pp. 8-9)

As you can see from the above exchange between the two female characters, Rokeya Hossain manages to successfully call into question women’s seclusion from social contact by parodying a system in which men are forced to imagine themselves as the secluded ones. Focusing on the value of “brain power” rather than “physical strength” (Hossain, 1988, p. 13), Hossain’s story reveals the author’s deep conviction in the power of intelligence and education as a way of liberating women from the physical and social seclusion they suffer in a patriarchal society. By turning the tables on men who wield power over women by locking them up behind literal and symbolic veils, the author draws our attention to the urgent necessity for women to free themselves of these shackles by taking their destinies into their own hands.

Activity:

Read some of the poems from the Pakistani collection *We Sinful Women* and the short story “*Sultana’s Dream*” by Rokeya Hossain. Try to find a poem in the collection which reflects sentiments similar to the ones articulated in the short story. Which literary form (verse or the short story) according to you is a more effective means of expressing resistance against the oppression women feel towards social customs which seclude them? Explain in your own words.

3.4 THE VEIL IN MIDDLE EASTERN & NORTH AFRICAN LIFE NARRATIVES

In the previous section, we looked at some examples of life narratives from South Asia in which the veil has played a prominent literary role. Similarly, in many countries of the Middle East, as well as in North Africa, where veiling is a common cultural and religious practice, we find that the veil appears as a powerful symbol in the works of women writers. This is especially true in life narratives which draw upon real life experiences to create literary works. Here, we will look at these issues in the context of two specific examples of literary texts from Iran and Morocco.

3.4.1 Socio Political History of Iran and Veiling

Iran is a multi-religious and multi-cultural country, although the majority of Iranian people are Muslims. Before the 1979 revolution, the veil had not been imposed throughout history in Iran by the clerical class. In the early sixteenth century, dominant interpretations of the Koran did not legislate veiling, which was practiced mostly only by the wealthy. During the second decade and a half of the twentieth century, called the post-constitutional period (1911-25), the modernizing and Westernizing nation-state was established by Reza Shah Pahlavi, replacing the Qajar dynasty. Reza Shah dreamt of a secular state, and like his contemporary Atatürk, he perceived religion as retrogressive and the *ulema* as obstacles to progress. Reza Shah imposed European dress on the population, opened the schools to women and permitted them to enter the work places. In 1936, Reza Shah abolished the wearing of the veil. Under Reza Shah, class attitudes to the veil reversed, with the upper class embracing Western reforms including Western dress, while the working poor saw the veil as a sign of propriety. Reza Shah's unpopularity is strongest among the working class and the religious right, and with his abdication, most urban women begin wearing *chadors* again, though without face veils. After the 1979 revolution, on the contrary, the Islamic government's political and cultural tendencies were against the West, particularly the U.S., and veiling became compulsory. Between 1979 and 1980, some women's spontaneous demonstrations against the mandatory veil occurred.

Women Rights' Violation in Iran

Many women human rights defenders have been arrested by the government, imprisoned, and sacked from their careers throughout the post-revolutionary period. Many Iranian women and young girls have been subjected to sexual violence, torture, and insult; and some of them have been executed and stoned to death. There are evidences and documents which prove that some young girls have been arrested for social crimes, such as inappropriate dress, and have been raped in the Islamic Republic prisons. These violations against women's rights are legislated by the Islamic government. Since 1979 in Iran, there has been a drastic reduction in women's personal, political, cultural, legal, and social rights. Islamic law has re-established polygamy, lowered the legal age of puberty for women to seven, reduced women's ability to inherit or It is obvious that the veil has become one of the non-negotiable essentials governing women's lives in the post-revolutionary Iran. However, a lot of Iranian women try to show their disobedience by putting some strands of their hair out of their scarves. Such gestures of disobedience allow Iranian women to develop their identities specifically for the reason that they are forbidden and enable them to construct their identities against the torturous rituals governing what they are forced to wear, how they are expected to act, the gestures they have to control, the daily struggle against arbitrary rules and restrictions.

Modernization in Iran and Women

In the early 1970s at the height of Iran's drive toward 'modernization', the Cultural Council of the Ministry of Arts and Culture prepared a list of the great figures of Iranian history. Unfortunately it contained the names of only four women. Women have always been confined to the domestic life doing stitching, embroidery, or tapestry. The pen was in the hands of men. It was only in the year 1947 that the first collection of short stories by a woman writer appeared in Iran, *Fire Quenched* by Simin Daneshvar. Though the Islamic Republic did not lay down any rule for the portrayal of women in literature, it took a definite position in the presentation of women on screen. It said, Muslim women should be shown as chaste, and motherly, in charge of raising God fearing and responsible children in society. Women should not be treated as a commodity or used as sexual objects. Women actors were given static part and shown in such a way as to avoid showing their bodies. Eye contact and touching between men and women were not encouraged.

As you can see from the above, the concern for the compulsory wearing of the veil has been there in Iran for a long time. Secularized women have protested, challenged and resisted the veil. Similarly, religiously oriented women too debated the issue from the religious standpoint. Let us now briefly examine the place of the veil in life-writings by Iranian women.

3.4.2 The Veil in the Writings of Iranian Women

The veil has emerged as a favorite theme of women writers in post revolutionary literature. Inside the country it has become the yardstick of Iranian politics and the level of tolerance of the regime. The veil has always been seen as a multilayered metaphor, accommodating itself in a puzzling diversity of ideologies. Proponents of nationalism, westernization, Islamic revivalism, feminism and other political ideologies have all found in the veil their own message and meaning. The veil is seen by some as a challenge to western domination, class privilege, sexual license and corruption. Some women of substance like the poet, Tahereh Saffarzadeh and the writer Zahra Rahnavard, along with some other educated women veiled themselves voluntarily before the revolution. If the veil appeared to some as a retrogressive step, a backward turning of the clock, or an alienated reaction against modernization, to those western-educated writers it is a valid re-assertion of independence and indigenous values, expressing a desire to create a new social order, just and honourable.

For, others though the veil is a symbol of social deprivation and oppression. Many Iranian women writers have expressed this sentiment through the form of the short story or through verse form. For instance, in a collection edited by John Green and Farsin Yazdanfar entitled *A Walnut's Sapling on*

Masih's Grave (1993), we find several short stories by authors such as Mahshid Amirshahi, Mihan Bahrami, Simin Danishvar, Shahrnush Parsipu and Guli Taraqqi, which reflect this view. Similarly, in *Veils and Words* (1992) by Farzaneh Milani, you can read about the lives and works of well-known Iranian writers and poets such as Tahereh Qorratol'Ayn, Parvin E'tessami, Forugh Farrokhzad, Tahereh Saffarsadeh and Semeen Behbahani, all of whom have dealt with the issue of the veil in their various literary works.

In the above sections, we have examined the theme of veiling in life narratives in the context of the socio-political history of Iran. The practice of veiling is also common in some North African countries. Below, let us look take the example of a well-known woman writer from a North African country, Morocco.

Activity:

Find out more about any one of the Iranian women short story writers, and about any one of the Iranian poets mentioned above. Read one short story and one poem by these respective writers. Describe how the image of the veil in the works that you have read.

3.4.3 The Veil in Life Narratives from Morocco

In Morocco sights of women wearing long head-scarves and covered dresses is common. Many Moroccans believe that the headscarf is a political symbol and hence carries heavy meaning in the wearing or not wearing of it.

In **Fatima Mernissi's** widely acclaimed book *Dreams of Trespass* (1994), the author traces the life narrative of a young girls' life in a traditional Moroccan harem. As we follow the young girl in her day to day experiences, we notice that she is quite a curious, precocious little child who is constantly

questioning. Her mother and aunts repeatedly discourage her from asking too many questions. The frontier, literally and metaphorically, is one of the main entities that shape her life and being. The young Mernissi has an almost paradoxical relationship with the different frontiers. For her, it is both a source of happiness and a source of pain, it is mysterious to her but at the same time, she can feel how it smothers her and the other women. At the beginning, it is very obvious that she feels very overwhelmed by the frontier, as she writes, “looking for the frontier has become my life’s occupation. Anxiety eats at me whenever I cannot situate the geometric line organizing my powerlessness” (Mernissi, 1994, p. 3). The frontier is not so cut and dry and that there is an equilibrium that has lasted for generations, trying to define the frontier will make her journey of self-discovery one of tumultuous means. She writes, “Our house gate was a definite hudud, or frontier, because you needed permission to step in or out. Every move had to be justified and even getting to the gate was a procedure” (Mernissi, 1994, p. 21).

The harem was about private space and the rules regulating it. It did not need walls. Once you knew what was forbidden, you carried the harem within. Mernissi listened to a special program on Radio Cairo about Huda Sha’raoui and the progress of women’s rights in Egypt and Turkey Chama is one of the characters that are probably endowed with the most freedom. Her affinity for dramatic performances allows her to talk about the taboo of topics and is tolerated by the men of the harem.

Check Your Progress:

*Read **Dreams of Trespass** by Fatima Mernissi. Describe the many facets of the image of the harem as used in this novel.*

In the above we have used Morocco as just one illustrative example of a North African nation. You are encouraged to find out more about the works of other North African women writers and read these on your own. One such feminist writer whose works you may find interesting is **Nawal El Saadawi**, from **Egypt**, who has published many novels describing the struggles of Egyptian women against patriarchy (See Section 3. 8 for suggested readings by this author).

3.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have learnt how the system of the veil has come to operate in countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Iran. We have also learnt how throughout history, women in India have fought for their emancipation from the veil. We have read about writers from many different cultures, including Afghanistan and Morocco, who have raised their voices against the restrictions imposed upon their bodies through the imposition of the veil. We have discussed how in states like Iran, the veil has been a topic of debate through out the evolving history of that nation., and how oppressive regimes like the Taliban are enforcing inhuman laws on the women of Afghanistan. Through different literary forms, such as the novel, the short story, and poetry, the women writers whose works we have discussed, have been able to critique the oppression experienced by compulsory impositions of veiling, and have been able to use the veil as a literary metaphor to draw attention to women's experiences and struggles against their oppression.

3.6 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) a) Discuss the prevalence of the veil in ancient India.
b) Critically analyse the metaphor of veiling in any one short story by Ismat Chughtai.
- 2) Read the two poems by Fahmida Riaz and Ishrat Aafreen mentioned in this Unit. Discuss how the veil is used as an important image in these poems and to what effect.
- 3) Read the story "Sultana's Dream". Do you think the feminist utopia described by Rokeya Hossain is an ideal world for women? Why or why not? Justify your response.
- 4) Discuss how the veil has been used as an item of political debate in Iran. How has this been taken up by Iranian women writers? Explain with the help of examples.
- 5) Discuss how the veil acts as a metaphor in the writings of Iranian women.
- 6) Discuss, with the help of example, the veil as a tool of oppression or resistance in the works of women writers from Afghanistan and Morocco.

3.7 REFERENCES

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UNIT 4 RE-INVENTING THE BODY

Devaleena Das

Structure

- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Objectives
- 4.3 Feminism and the Body
- 4.4 Third Wave Feminism and Reinvention of the Body
- 4.5 Beauty and the Beast: The Body and Beauty Ideals
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4.1 INTRODUCTION

The discourse on the female body has been a predominant terrain of contestation and debate in women's & gender studies. By now you have already become familiar with the question of how the female body has been subjected to a symbolic space of 'desire', 'lack' and 'violence' by assertive male hegemony. In this unit, we are going to reflect primarily on how woman's body is re-invented as a medium of protest against patriarchy, and the manner in which it is wielded with the power of emancipation. The unit will explore, through life narratives of women, how feminists have deconstructed woman's body and the embodied femininity is redefined. Ranging from the sacred to the obscene female body, the unit will reflect on how the same body can be perceived as vile or aesthetic, and how it transcends the line between sacred and profane.

4.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, you will be able to:

- Recognize various traditional patriarchal stigma related to the female body;
- Explain feminist movements in relation to women's body, sexuality, integrity, identity and power;

- Explore new visions adopted by feminists;
- Analyse the re-invention of the female body as a space for liberation;
- Describe the links between violence and the quest for identity and power; and
- Discuss ‘body politics’ in relation to geographical, cultural and political space.

4.3 FEMINISM AND THE BODY

We have been examining feminist discourse on the body in various contexts throughout this programme (see especially, MWG 004, “Gendered Bodies & Sexualities”). From these earlier discussions, you would have observed that woman’s body is always under scrutiny, subjected to certain ideologies from times immemorial. It is a space of vigilance, the panoptical space that may be violated or threatened for losing its integrity. It is restricted by social oppressions and perversions that limit its mobility. The notions constructed about the ideal female body are the outcome of patriarchal socio-political systems. In the larger context, the female body is also allegorised and seen as the metaphor of various social, cultural and political spaces of possession, annexation and transgression. As a primary site for construction of social and spiritual meanings, the female body can be seen sometimes as the national space representing nationhood and sometimes representing the mysterious dark space of witchcraft. The Belgian anatomist Adrianus Spigelius in his book *De Formato Foetu* (1627) has provided a detailed anatomical study of the female body in relation to botany and geography. The allusion between flower and female body is done on the basis of modesty and reproductive function. In his art, the abdomen and the placenta open like a blooming flower to the viewer’s gaze. The uterus for Spigelius is a space that requires proper fertilization and irrigation in order to transform it into a fertile ground. Irrespective of being a body of an individual, it is the site of power problematized by gender, race and class. Further, the discourse of occidental female body and the oriental female body is another area of inquiry. Whether it is Shakespeare’s Cleopatra or the African mistress in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1975), the black woman’s body is epitomised as the space of monstrosity, raw sexuality and sin, while the white female body is seen to be the citadel of purity, serenity and divinity. Marlow, Conrad’s protagonist in *Heart of Darkness* defines the mistress as, “a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman....She was savage and superb, wild eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress” (Conrad, 1975, p. 167).

On the other hand we find that Cleopatra’s body in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* is constructed as the space of Roman invasion, exploration and difference. Her black body is therefore the space of white fantasy.

Feminist counter-discourses have ‘re-invented’ the same body as the space for female empowerment and as pace that is strongly interrelated to their emotions and psychology. Over a period of time, in feminist discourse, the body has been reflected as the space of emancipation and liberation of the mind. Not only that, the same body is seen to be the bearer of embedded history, the ‘palimpsest’ of life narratives and truths untold that cannot be erased. For instance, Mahashweta Devi’s short story titled “Draupadi” revises the eponymous epic character in a tribal woman who is rebelling through her body. Draupadi’s nude body is itself her weapon to raise a voice when she is being stripped off by her rapists. Mahashweta Devi has delineated beautifully how her sole possession which is the subject of male aggression and violence becomes itself a weapon of protest. In the year 2004, some Manipuri women stripped themselves publicly to protest against the rape of a woman by the regiment. Reminiscent of Frantz Fanon statement in his seminal work *The Wretched of the Earth* (1990), that oppression and violence can be erased by greater violence, the violence hurled at Draupadi is avenged with greater violence so that the object of lust becomes the object of horror. A re-invention of the woman’s body is thus brought about in this story.

4.4 THIRD WAVE FEMINISM AND REINVENTION OF THE BODY

You have already learnt about the three waves of feminism in previous courses (see especially, MWG 001, Block 1, Unit 1). Here, we will review what we have learnt previously in terms of the impact of these movements on the conceptualization and representation of the body.

As you are already familiar now, the evolution of feminist movements is divided into three waves ranging from late 18th century to 21st century. First Wave Feminism, germinating predominantly in western world in the late 18th century, was concerned with equality of women while Second Wave Feminism raised issues concerning women of different ethnicity, race and colour. Second wave feminists started focusing on the body in terms of reproduction, abortion and pornography. However, the question of the female body still did not become the main concern. Third Wave-Feminism, originating in the 1990s, encouraged ambiguities, admired the body as the defining self, and celebrated individual sexuality as well as homosexuality. Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics*, published in 1969, had already raised a storm in demanding that women must have complete right over their own bodies and must be free to explore their sexuality outside the constraints of marriage and maternity. French feminists like Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray linked women’s writing to an exploration of the body (“*écrire le corps*” or “writing the body” in Cixous’ terms). These French writers and

theorists protested against ‘phallogocentrism’ (the socio-cultural domination of the sign of the male sexual organ as the symbolic representation of power). They interrogated notions of woman’s body as a site of desire, “*jouissance*” or pleasure. Thus, to some extent Second Wave-Feminism led to the foundation for Third Wave Feminism to explore individuality of the self and the body.

What, then, are the various agenda of Third Wave Feminism? The first revolt of Third-wave Feminism is against stereotypes, and hence it deconstructed patriarchal ideologies about the female body and embraced individualism. ‘**New Feminism**’ or ‘**Grrl Feminism**’ as it is called ventured into the male domain and reviewed woman’s body in the light of pornography, queer theory and eco feminism. It mainly originated among female musicians who went for a revolution that essentially reflects girl power. They named it as **Riot Girl Movement**. Here, feminism was redefined in the new light of punk rock. Bikini Kill, Lipstick Feminism and Cybergrrl Feminism were influenced by the notion of Donna Haraway’s ‘cyborg’ (a cybernetic organism is a confluence of biological and electronic mechanism) about which you have learnt in MWG 003, Block 4, Unit 5.7.2). The encouragement to write about one’s own body is further enhanced by Haraway’s concept of the cyborg as it represents the search for a new code of language against phallogocentrism. Haraway attempts to redefine the female body in the new light of technology against the age old coercion of women to nature. The cyborg culture reflects on certain modifications of the image of the body. It breaks down the traditional image of masculine and feminine body and the cultural opposition between man and woman. In Haraway’s analysis the cyborg structure has no pre-defined codes and it is not necessary to appropriate the bodily structure to the codes of gender, race and cultural orientations. Representations of female cyborgs in movies and media reflect that they are devoid of stereotypical gendered or biological characteristics. Haraway’s revolutionary concept of cyborg in feminism further influenced Queer Theory, especially in relation to the notion of trans-identity. Haraway claims that “we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs” (Haraway, 1991, p. 150). The concept of the cyborg attempted to see feminism and the female body through the dimension of science, technology, empiricism and hybridisation.

The clamour to respect one’s own body and to recognise non-normative sexual identities and subjectivities is the main concern of these movements. The American author, Camille Anna Paglia, has dealt with such controversial issues in relation to woman’s body such as abortion, prostitution, sodomy and homosexuality in her book, *Sexual Personae* (1990). According to Paglia, the male ego tries to redefine uncontrollable nature in the female body. She defines “woman’s body as a sea acted upon by the month’s lunar wave motion” (Paglia, 1990, p. 9). This is because, according to her, woman’s

body is related to fluid from puberty to menopause. Many feminists have criticised Paglia as anti-feminist because of her radical comments. For instance, in regards to the violation and rape of the female body, she states:

Lust and aggression are fused in male hormones.Sperm are miniature assault troops, and the ovum is a solitary citadel that must be breached....Feminism, arguing from the milder woman's point of view, completely misses the blood-lust in rape, the joy of violation and destruction...Women may be less prone to such fantasies because they physically lack the equipment for sexual violence. They do not know the temptation of forcibly invading the sanctuary of another body.

(Paglia, 1990, p.2)

In her book called *Vamps and Tramps* (1994), she claims that stripping is an art form that can be traced back to the practice of prostitution in ancient Babylon. She re-visions pornography as an art form and rejects the claim that erotic women dancers, such as belly dancers, are being exploited. Paglia claims that these women are independent artists, performers whose body is the material of performance. What is interesting in Paglia's work is the altered look at the female body and pornography, and the eradication of the line of demarcation between dirty and clean.

Deconstructing the Body in Prostitution & Pornography

The above discussion about the dichotomy of the sacred and obscene body, the oppressed body and resistant body leads us to an important area of discussion. A prostitute's body has always been looked down upon as defiled and unholy, the marginalised sexualised 'other'. Third wave feminism reinvented how the same performing body becomes holy and unholy. The feminist pornographer Candida Royalle in her interview has claimed that "pornography is like looking at prostitutes. It [is] just another version of prostitution. Instead of being with a prostitute....you look at a prostitute" (Nagle, 1997. p. 156). This process of equating of prostitution and pornography both as performance provides us with an important way of examining the re-invention of the female body. Feminists like Luce Irigaray and Carole Pateman had viewed prostitution as male defined female sexuality or a kind of social contract that publicly encourages male sexual rights. In contrast, postmodernist feminist Annie Sprinkle believes that the body, while performing, feels empowered. In this act of performance, the woman is the sole controller of her body. Her body is in her control and she is, as Catherine Elwes explains:

author, subject, activator, director, designer. When a woman speaks within a performance tradition, she is understood to be conveying her own perceptions,... She is both signifier and that which is signified... There is no man-made script to give the male spectator an easy escape via author identification—nothing can protect him from direct confrontation with the woman who returns his gaze and demands freedom of speech and equality of communication.

(Freeman, 2003, p. 18)

From this perspective, the prostitute's body is re-invented as a body of art. Even the body becomes the medium of articulation, an organ of speech, a medium of communication and empowerment. This reminds us how Cleopatra in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* used her body in a strategic manner to conquer Antony and Caesar. Her art of self-representation indulges not only eroticism and beauty but also changeability. She is always in flux, and her brilliantly arrayed body is always empowered to set Rome in turmoil.

Check Your Progress:

In what ways does the performing body act as a telling life narrative? What can it reveal to us? Explain, using a gendered perspective, as discussed above.

4.5 BEAUTY AND THE BEAST: THE BODY AND BEAUTY IDEALS

Woman's body has been enmeshed in notions of spatial surveillance, protection and denial. The woman herself is deprived of the right to take control of her own body and contrarily, it has become an inhibition for herself. The idea of beauty as an essential requirement is further problematized by such discursive issues like fertility, civilization and power. Dominant beauty ideals have varied across chronological, geographical, ethnic and cultural boundaries. Why is bodily beauty essential for a woman? It is significantly related to socio-political demands and therefore to her self-esteem, happiness and importance from the perspective of the male gaze. Complicated by issues of race and colour, bodily appearance has often led to mistreatment and discrimination. Women have been running after whitening and anti-ageing creams, or suffering from anorexia in order to follow the western ideal of a lean, thin, white body. The dichotomy between 'ugly' and 'beautiful' female bodies is nothing but reflection of male gratification. Many feminist writers have therefore to unveil such stereotypical recurring definition of the beautiful and the ugly. One of the well known Australian feminist poets Judith Wright, in her autobiography called *Half a Lifetime* (2000) has delineated in her candid narration how she confronted her adolescent body as a space that stands for inadequacy, resentment and confusions. The male parameters for the female body have resulted in a constructed definition of an ideal female body which acts like a social force and orders sexuality. With her granny-glasses, large nose and teeth out of alignment for which she is called Bucky, Wright remembers her inability to be like the French sleeping doll gifted to her as a feminine model. She has hated such prioritized discursive elaboration of an ideal body and hence her body has not been admirable but an 'abject' space of anguish and lack. The term 'abject' is derived from Julia Kristeva's abjection theory in her book *Powers of Horror* (1982). Kristeva points out the psychic trauma, revulsion and bodily disgust that is the result of a fractured self. Judith Wright also observes, in a frank manner, her hatred of her own adolescent body as a tabooed space:

The miseries of early adolescence had begun. I was acquiring lumps and spots, as well as the terrible little towels which I had personally to wash and keep out of everyone's sight...I thought now that this curse has descended I would never again be able to ride horses or go swimming and would have to wear uncomfortable safety-pinned towels forever.

(Wright, 2000, p. 97)

Kristeva enumerates how the various bodily changes like menstruation, pregnancy, or sexual arousal account for a convulsion and release of anguish and anger. Wright's lament is because of the space of denial that she inhabited after becoming conscious of the obligation of possessing a body that is always under observation. But in her later poems the Australian bard has endorsed her derelict body in the process of the evolution of the self. In the poem 'Naked Girl and Mirror' she loves her "swelling softness," comparing it to the topographical space of Aboriginal Australia:

Smooth once-hermaphrodite shoulders, too tenderly
your long slope runs, above those sudden shy
curves furred with light that spring below your space.

(Wright, 2000, p.138)

Feminists have gradually rejected such oppression in favour of the re-appropriation of women's bodies as the space of liberation and intimacy through exfoliation of the self. They have celebrated their sexuality through their body. An interesting essay in this regard is "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976) by Hélène Cixous, in which she deconstructs Lacanian phallogentrism and Freudian imposition of passivity on women. The images of Medusa, the chthonic monster with her multiplicity of emotions appears in Cixous' discourse as expressive of repressed desires and unrestrained impulses. The image of a woman with her wanton sexuality emerging in her writing disarrays all phallogentric structures. In the practical sense, one glaring example is the American pop star Madonna, (whom *Guinness World Records* certified as the world's top-selling female recording artist) with her exorbitant libidinal energy in relation to her profligate creativity. Madonna's exposition of the body has been subjected to several criticisms. The artist has changed her bodily structure from voluptuous to lean and thin. Her video *Open Your Heart* which exhibits her body, is seen by Susan Bordo as one that will "facilitate rather than deconstruct the presentation of Madonna's body as an object of display" (Schwichtenberg, 1993, p. 287). (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snsTmi9N9G>). According to Bordo, the new body of Madonna conforms to the new definition of beauty which is muscular and bony but "it conceals its praxis, it does not reveal its pain" (Schwichtenberg, 1993, p.286).

Madonna's constant change of her images reflects the several culturally constructed feminine images which are essentially not her identity. These innumerable images reflect how Madonna has explored female empowerment through her body where each time a new identity evokes new challenges. Interestingly in her video 'Open Your Heart' we see that Madonna's body ultimately sublimates into an androgynous form. Thus, what it signifies is that the culturally constructed image of a woman is unstable and yet Madonna's empowerment lies in her ability to construct each time a new

image playfully stretching and deconstructing the boundaries of gender identities.

Check Your Progress:

What are some ideals imposed on the female body? Sum up, in your own words, how feminists have reacted to these beauty ideals.

Activity:

Read Cixous' essay "The Laugh of the Medusa". Jot down your reactions to the essay in the light of the above discussion on the female body.

4.6 BODY IN POPULAR CULTURE

Madonna has been the popular and encouraging epitome for later female pop artists like Spice Girls, Britney Spears and Kelly Osbourne who have popularised the concept of 'Material Girl'. The most significant among them are the Riot Grrrls who ushered in new images of femininity by inheriting Madonna's idea of incessant recreation of the image of the self. The Riot Grrrl band often projected the adolescent female body which has been subjected to surveillance and consumerism. They dismantled the appropriation of the feminine body as an industry for commercialism. Instead, the Riot Grrrls reveal how a woman's body can create a room of one's own. Instead of consumption, the body becomes a medium of production so that their style, their music and body art become the symbolic representation of their creativity. Their protest against reduction of the female body to an object of desire is registered through the act of marking and tagging of body parts such as stomach, hand, and forehead, as well as with lacerating abuses and political slogans hurled at women. The Riot Grrrls also rejected traditional cosmetics and accessories to decorate their bodies and instead they used crayons and sketch pens as a revolutionary style of their own. Their unconventional hair style, boots, tattoos and body piercing which may appear to be 'unfeminine' is a way to communicate their individualism and independence. In fact, their vehement appearance is sometimes criticised as aggressive by the patriarchal society because they destabilise the iconic images of women down the age. They have embraced images of 'fallen women' like prostitutes and whores, and redefined these identities with female empowerment. They also recalled the Amazonian women who have mutilated their left breasts.

Besides the Riot Grrrl band, another popular rock band called Spice Girls of 1990s also reflected athletic body with muscular bony stature. Melanie Chisholm, also known as Sporty Spice, epitomised her masculine body as the images of freedom and liberation. This bodily representation is complemented by a tomboyish attitude and gymnastic dance movements which represent freedom, unlike the restricted movement of women in the early days where it was customary that 'lady-like' attitude should be reflected in certain codified movements and postures. The constructed definition of ideal femininity has given rise to cosmetic surgery to correct the flawed body. Forceful reduction of obesity or silicon breast implants and various other cosmetic surgeries are examples of an indirect way of surveillance and domination of the female body to uphold the ideal definition of beauty. However, some feminists endorse cosmetic surgery believing that it can also empower a woman to take control of her body through technology.

Activity:

Can you think of a contemporary popular band/ group/ performer who either endorses stereotypes about the female body or questions the conventional notions attributed to the female body? Describe your views on the work of this popular artist.

4.7 RACIALISED AND COLOURED BODY

You have already become familiar with issues concerning race, ethnicity and gender from your previous readings (see especially, MWG 007, Block 3, Unit 1). In these units, we have already discussed questions of difference and the double marginalisation of women of colour based on gender and race. In literature by women writers, the dark skin female body is a space of duality—attraction and repulsion, fear and enchantment. It has been seen as the vulnerable and mysterious space inviting the gaze to explore and create myths and fantasies. The very famous Ugandan poet called Okot p' Bitek has wonderfully dealt with the abuses that a black female body suffers and unfolded the real beauty and power embedded in the same body. One of her characters called Lawino in the collection of poems called *Song of Lawino* (1995) criticises the modern African woman who wants to mimic the white female body. The section is titled *The Woman With Whom I Share My Husband* and Lawino makes a sharp criticism of the English speaking African modern woman who desires to be like the white woman:

The beautiful one aspires
 To look like a white woman;
 Her lips are red-hot
 Like glowing charcoal,
 She resembles the wild cat
 That has dipped its mouth in blood,

And she believes
 That this is beautiful
 Because it resembles that face of
 a white woman!

She looks as if
 She has been ill for a long time!
 Actually she is starving
 She does not eat

She says a beautiful woman
 Must be slim like a white
 Woman;

And when she walks
 You hear her bones rattling,
 Her waist resembles that of the hornet.
 The beautiful one is dead dry
 Like a stump,
 She is meatless
 Like a shell
 On a dry river bed.
 (Bitek, 1995, p.18)

Bitek celebrates the African woman's body in its representation of the famous dictum "Black is beautiful":

When Ocol was wooing me
 My breasts were erect
 And they shook
 As I walked briskly, And as I walked
 I threw my long neck
 This way and that way
 Like the flower of the lyonno lily
 Waving in a gentle breeze.
 (Bitek, 1995, p.39)

An African female body has always been the geometry of sexuality for the whites. According to the European philosopher Immanuel Kant, beauty is subjective. In his *Critique of Judgement* (1788) Kant associates beauty with pleasure and pain. A dark female body gives a discursive definition of beauty and reveals that bodily beauty has no universal paradigm but varies from person to person.

4.8 LET US SUM UP

Woman's body has been the text on which men have attempted to inscribe hierarchical systems, cultural meanings, symbolic order and rules and regulations that are strictly male centric. In this unit, we have seen how second wave feminism raised the question of the individuality of the female body, while third wave feminism demanded woman's right over her own body and freedom from socio-political demands. Deconstruction of traditional definitions of an ideal female body have helped to undo homogenous, universal, racialized beauty ideals. In so doing, women have protested that the female body is not meant to serve as a conduit for patriarchal ideologies. Thus the body is re-invented as a medium of one's identity. In this unit, we have focused on the idea that, in the quest of the self, the body plays a vital role in defining women's narratives within the cultural context. The revolution can be seen also in the field of music where female rock bands emerged with a new image of woman, sometimes bony and masculine, sometimes tom-boyish and sometimes androgynous. Pornography and prostitution are no more seen as tabooed but re-viewed as performing art where the woman's body is endowed with power to take control of the gaze. The body is no more a passive receptacle but in its re-invention, it appears as a voice that challenges, deconstructs and perturbs patriarchal ideologies.

4.9 GLOSSARY

Hegemony : This is a term coined by Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci. Hegemony for Gramsci is a kind of predominance of one class over another in a way where the dominated class accepts the views and ideas of the dominator as natural. In a way the process of domination involves willingness and consent of the subordinate class.

Panoptica : This term refers to Jeremy Bentham's architectural space of imprisonment which is always under constant surveillance. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Michel Foucault used the concept to exemplify that physical domination is not necessarily the way to control but constant observation is itself a way to control. Woman's body like the panopticon is always under observation, and therefore dominated by the 'gaze'.

4.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Explain the various body politics associated with female body, with the help of literary examples.
- 2) How have the different waves of feminism helped in the re-invention of the body? Discuss some examples of life-narratives which reflect these changes.
- 3) Comment on Material Girl and the reinvention of female body by female rock bands.
- 4) How do you think a woman's body of desire transforms into a body of protest and horror? Explain with examples.
- 5) How do you think that identity and body are inter-related? What are new ways that the female body is represented in popular culture and media?
- 6) Explain the politics involved in race, colour and female body. How is beauty re-invented along with the body in literary works by women writers?

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