UNIT 3  POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Feminist theory consists of several strands which include formative feminisms, multicultural feminism, feminism and history, postcolonial feminism, third world feminism, transnational feminism or global feminism, eco-feminism, and black feminism. (You have already come across some of these in Block 2 and in Unit 1 of Block 5). Feminist theories emerged from the experiences of
women under different social, political, and economic situations, and were influenced by the social and moral philosophies of the time. Academic scholarship arising from these theories led to activism in the form of social movements.

Early feminist theories had a tendency to lump all women together and treat them as homogenously marginalised. In order to highlight a common sisterhood, they often ignored the social, cultural and racial differences that divide women. Postcolonial feminism has emerged in an attempt to address the experiences of women born and raised in former colonies of western imperial powers. It argues that these experiences are different from those of women who live in the western world. It draws comparisons between colonization and women’s suppression in the light of geographical, historical and cultural factors.

The field of postcolonialism is vast and open to debates and questions from national, cultural, political, and social arenas. In this unit, we will look at postcolonial feminism’s concerns with issues of cultural diversity, ethnic, racial and cultural differences. We will also examine the power relations in order to come to a more subtle understanding of the dimensions of neo-colonial domination.

### 3.2 OBJECTIVES

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

- Describe the relationship between colonialism and postcolonialism;
- Examine the characteristics of postcolonial feminism;
- Analyze the contribution of a few important postcolonial feminist theorists; and
- Situate postcolonial feminism in the context of third world feminism in general.

### 3.3 COLONIALISM, POSTCOLONIALISM AND FEMINISM

#### 3.3.1 Colonialism

You may have come across this term/concept in your readings of other disciplines. Can you make sense of it here? We shall use the terms ‘colonialism’ and ‘postcolonialism’ often in this unit. For further understanding, you may note that ‘colonialism’ refers to the policy of having colonies to keep them dependent on the colonizers, so that colonized nations may be used and exploited as material, economic resources by the colonial powers. It also refers to the trait of colonial life in all its aspects. The impact of colonialism
Postcolonial Feminism is in terms of territories appropriated (geographic), racism institutionalized (historic), and civilizations destroyed (cultural). Therefore, colonialism forms the origin of postcolonial discussion. The colonial history of the nineteenth century was marked by western imperial appropriation whereas the twentieth century witnessed a reversal with the colonies and empires becoming independent. Postcolonial theory emerges out of this dialectical process of oppression and struggle for freedom from oppression. Colonization is a general term denoting various phenomena in political theory, feminist and Marxian writings. Marxian theory uses it as a category of economic exploitation. Feminist scholars use the term to describe “the appropriation of their experience and struggles” (Mohanty, 1988, p.49).

3.3.2 Postcolonialism: A Discourse

In comparison to colonialism, postcolonial discourse is the discourse of the colonized/oppressed. Since there is ongoing interrogation and knowledge addition within this discursive realm, it does not end with the departure of the colonizers. On an ongoing basis, postcolonialism contends with various forms of oppression. Postcolonialism has multiple meanings:

- First, it is a literal description of conditions in former colonial societies.
- Second, it is a description of global conditions after independence of these colonies. In this case, the usage is more abstract since it is primarily discursive and textual.
- Third, it describes the above named conditions as a branch of knowledge.

The differences between the usages have to be understood for our analytical purpose. There is a developing interest in the third aspect, that is, postcolonialism as a branch of knowledge, and this interest has grown in diversity in recent times. Postcolonialism as used by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin in The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures (1989) describes all cultures affected by the process of colonialism and imperial power from the beginning of colonization to the present. It is argued that the countries formerly occupied by colonial powers continue to be affected by their former history of colonization, and thus the colonized continue to suffer the consequences of their history.

Thus defined, postcoloniality is released from the fixity of location and history of colonization and is identified with discourse. Discourse refers to written or spoken communications or debates. Postcolonial theory is a critical study of colonial texts, both literary and non-literary. One of the most prominent and well-known scholars associated with postcolonial studies, Edward Said, initiated
the discourse/debate on postcolonialism with the publication of his famous book *Orientalism*. There are other significant contributions to the origin of postcolonialism such as *The Empire Writes Back* and other similar works from African, Caribbean and Indian writers and social theorists. These writers and theorists engaged with postcolonial discourses and hence postcolonial studies found a place in the academy. Their contributions are given in subsequent sections of this unit. One needs to take note of the fact that postcolonial discourse is interdisciplinary and ranges from discourse on history to research of colonial governments to literary analysis, from critique of scientific work to economic theory. Ania Loomba (1998) sums up postcolonialism as a new critical vocabulary emerging from recent developments in social sciences, literature, linguistic studies, and discourses in the varied forms of communications.

The term postcolonialism earlier referred exclusively to the writings (discourses) and practices produced by the history of colonization with its new symbolism. It is now more of an abstraction figuratively applied to any strategic redefinition of marginality. According to Sara Suleri, “This reimagining of the postcolonial has made way for the theoretical articulation and has enabled the coalition between postcolonial and feminist theories” (Suleri in Ashcroft et al, 1995).

Postcolonialism articulates its theories alongside economic, social, cultural and historical factors. In practice, it works differently in different parts of the world. It conveys patriarchy as a relationship of inequality that is highly variable because it is to be considered always along with the other social structures. For all the above reasons, we need caution and qualification when using the term postcolonialism.

### 3.3.3 Postcolonial Feminism: Colonization and Subjugation of Women

Postcolonial feminists find parallels between colonialism and the subjugation of women. The western feminists had a narrow focus on the general belief that all women should be equal to men and emphasized the sameness and solidarity of women, irrespective of their manifold cultural, social, and economic differences. They did not examine the nuances and ambiguities of different cultures. Imperial colonization was associated with the belief that westerners were superior and the colonized were inferior races and, therefore, had to be civilized. Postcolonial feminists object to the idea of the commonality and universality of women’s lives, since these were generally based on the universalization of western women’s experiences, and wanted their own voices
to be heard. Through the lens of colonialism, they were able to explore a lot of issues relating to subordination, such as migration, slavery, representation, suppression and resistance, rather than treating gender in a simplistic sense. They believe that gender cannot be extricated from other aspects of their identity and also one cannot gloss over the differences between the western and third world countries. Postcolonial feminism has thus opened up areas and topics for academic studies and research that provide a more nuanced picture of women’s lives from around the world. Postcolonial feminist theories provide the analytic tools to address issues of structural inequities in groups that historically have been socially and economically disadvantaged through the creation of an intellectual discourse which can adequately reflect the struggle of women outside the western world.

The specific goals of postcolonial theorists and feminists are quite similar. Let us summarize them as follows:

i) They both seek not only to salvage past experiences but also to chart how the world can move beyond colonialism towards equality and opportunity for all.

ii) Postcolonial theory exposes and deconstructs the racist imperialist nature of colonialism and its ongoing global and material consequences. Third world women are the most exploited and therefore, a new form of international feminist agency is warranted to speak on behalf of all women.

iii) Postcolonial theory claims intellectual authority by claiming space for multiple voices. For instance, Gayatri Spivak’s voicing of the subaltern (‘Can the subaltern Speak?’, 1995) which includes women metaphorically and Edward Said’s attack on orientalism (Orientalism, 1978) make bold to disregard the established views of western colonial writings.

iv) Gayatri Spivak suggests the use of a “strategic essentialism” by incorporating the subaltern voice of the marginalized and silenced as a strategic and necessary position from which to speak and to be heard. Thus, the conceptualisation of the subaltern provides a social category of power structures. By speaking on behalf of a group (representation), postcolonial discourse is able to carve out a clear oppositional identity.

v) As presented by the African American feminist Bell Hooks, marginality is a site of resistance.

We can find parallels between postcolonial theory and postcolonial feminism in all the above mentioned goals/objectives.
Third World Feminism/ Tri-Continental Feminism

Postcolonial feminism is sometimes also called third world feminism. The term ‘third world feminism’ is preferred by some feminists for reasons of precision and context. Historically, the third world countries have been under colonialism and liberated through struggle against foreign power and are characteristically postcolonial.

In 1970, black feminist Frances Beal’s publication *Sisterhood is Powerful* named the second wave feminism as a white women’s movement since it insisted on organizing along the binary gender division of male/female alone and tended to ignore differences of race, culture, or class. However, US third world feminists were conscious that one’s race or class often determined access to privileges regardless of one’s gender. This type of consciousness was especially pertinent during the suffragette movement in the US. For instance, Sojourner Truth (a famous Black female abolitionist and women’s rights activist) found it necessary to repeatedly confront a convention of American white women with the question, “Ain’t I a woman?” This statement which is often quoted in feminist literature carries with it the imprint of race, culture, class, and gender and has become very significant in US third world feminism. As stated by Chela Sandoval, this form of “historical consciousness” enabled a different way of conceptualizing feminist consciousness and became a counter to western feminism (Sandoval, 2003, p.75).

The US third world feminists put forth some common views and a theoretical structure different from western feminism. Similar to postcolonial feminist discourses, the notion of the third world is a ‘cultural production’ symbolizing historical and cultural suppression experienced by those countries. Third world women’s writings focus on codification of scholarship as knowledge about women. ‘Third world women’ thus denotes an analytical category found in feminist writings. While the two streams of feminists within the west, western and US third world, have two different understandings of domination, subordination, and the nature of effective resistance, third world feminism reflects similar feminist concerns and ideology with US third world feminism.

‘Third world’ is a term popularly used to refer to the three geographical regions covered by Africa, Asia and Latin America. In the twentieth century, the development debates of the seventies used the terms North-South to emphasize the contrast between developed and developing countries. The term ‘Tri-Continental’ is considered more exact than the ‘third world’ in order to denote international identification. The First Conference of the Organization of Solidarity of People of Africa, Asia and Latin America held at Havana in 1966 resolved to insist on the ‘Tri-Continental’ instead of ‘Third world’ which
Postcolonial Feminism was seen as a bland homogenization of ‘The South’ and the negative definition of the non-west.

In summary, the theory of postcolonial feminism is clear evidence of the fact that there exist feminisms indigenous to the third world countries. The concerns and analyses of third world feminists are rooted in and responsive to the problem women face within their national contexts. By and large, third world/postcolonial feminism questions, challenges and even contradicts western feminism. Women’s movements speak in different voices since each of them has a different thrust influenced by different socio-cultural, political, and economic situations. Only within a specific socio-economic and political context, is it possible for women to have similar concerns and points of commonality. In the next section, we will look more closely at the specific characteristics of postcolonial feminism.

Check Your Progress: What do you understand by the term ‘postcolonialism’, both in a historical context, and as a discourse? What is ‘postcolonial feminism’? How are its goals similar to those of postcolonial theorists? Try to explain in your own words with the help of examples.

3.4 CHARACTERISTICS OF POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM

3.4.1 Indigenous Cultural Criticism

As you have seen above, postcolonialism was born out of the cultural critique of dominant, hegemonic powers wherever they may be. Academic discourses produced by writers of erstwhile colonized countries of the third world set the pace for this type of cultural criticism. These writings highlighted the ongoing resistance to colonialism. They undertook the study of cultural practices, extant and surviving, with a heightened emphasis on local and specific effects of colonialism and oppression. In short, postcolonial studies refer to a large and growing body of diverse and often conflicting formulations of the cultural production or writings and debates of oppressed people. Like feminist studies, it critiques the status quo. It is not a discipline or methodology as such, but rather a theoretical and cultural perspective.

The cultural criticism generated by postcolonial feminism is leveled against the first and second wave feminisms which are entirely western in conception, origin, and development. Postcolonial feminism is critical of the fact that the
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western constructions of indigenous women do not reflect the real cultural situations of these women. According to postcolonial feminists like Chandra Mohanty, mainstream western feminism represents the other women as ‘a composite, singular, third world woman’. Mohanty, an Indian feminist, reveals that this perception reflects an arbitrary construction. Western feminism homogenizes and systematizes the oppression of women without situating them in their culture, ideology and socioeconomic conditions which are different for different groups. Third world feminists raise serious objections to the consideration of women as “already constituted and coherent groups with identical interests and desires regardless of class, ethnic or radical location... The notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy cannot be applied universally and cross culturally” (Mohanty, 1988, p.52).

The exclusion and marginalization of women within national cultures is true of many countries which gained independence in the twentieth century. Exclusions based on race, gender and class may be culturally inherent. Women’s struggle for equality still continues even after liberation and thus reaffirms the need for, and relevance of, the discourse of postcoloniality.

Postcolonial feminist theory analyzes the relation between western women and indigenous women. Western women used their campaigning skills to advocate the rights of indigenous women drawing attention to the socio-cultural practices of sati, veiling, female seclusion, and other forms of patriarchal oppression. In the colonies of Africa and India, European women campaigned for the rights of indigenous women. Whether their advocacy improved the lives of indigenous women is debatable. The writings of Chandra Mohanty and Hazel Carby (White Women Listen!) laid the foundation for the critique of western feminism for having ignored cultural differences of women and became the main plank of postcolonial theorization.

The assumption that what is progressive for western women is necessarily the best for women elsewhere has been strongly criticized and questioned. What was vehemently opposed was the idea that women outside the west need to be saved by benevolent western feminists.

3.4.2 Heterogeneity, Plurality and Inclusion

Western feminists analyse women as a socially constituted homogeneous group across races, classes, and cultures. But women are also material subjects of their history. This means that women’s experiences are not just influenced by their gender but also by the specific contexts of the historical situations that they live in. Since these will vary across time periods and cultures, it would become impossible to speak of all women as having common experiences, problems or traits. While a sexist approach might label women as weak and
emotional, similarly, the concept of women as ‘sisters in struggle’ might end up projecting third world women as powerless, exploited and sexually harassed, and in dire need of being rescued. There are varied reasons for powerlessness. Therefore, postcolonial feminist theory questions the above mentioned binary between the powerful west and the powerless non-west. The non-homogeneity (heterogeneity) of women is raised by feminists like Chandra Mohanty as a counter to the trend of universalisation of women in western feminist theory. The non-homogeneity of women is an obvious fact. Whatever be the approach to the analysis of women, they are a heterogeneous group differentiated by socio-economic, cultural and locational characteristics as well as by degrees of adjustment to cultural and economic process.

Postcolonial feminism raises crucial questions of the plurality of women and the fact of seclusion that undermines the creation of a common, pluri-vocal language accessible for both men and women. Postcolonialism celebrates plurality through its explorations of marginality and heterogeneity. It rejects the universalisation of values and conventions. Edward Said identifies a kind of Eurocentric universalisation in *Orientalism*. The western representations of the East are questioned and their limitations and misrepresentations are exposed. These questions stress the need for recognition of plurality of women-centered experiences as located within their respective cultures and traditions and their critical revaluation of age-old cultural and religious mandates that have lost their present day applicability. In effect, postcolonial feminism seeks to determine whether women can lay claim to their own rights of ownership of that culture.

To sum up, postcolonial theory contradicts a universalized, homogenous concept of women and the exclusion of race, class and other factors in the analysis.

### 3.4.3 Double Colonization of Women

The most significant issue of postcolonial writings is the status of women in third world countries and cultures. The term ‘Double Colonization’ introduced by Holst-Peterson and Rutherford (1988) has become a durable description of the two forms of dominance, patriarchy and imperialism and of women’s status. Both forms of dominance, patriarchy and imperialism, are comparable and overlapping. Postcolonial feminist writings examine the role of white women in empire at the level of symbolism and also at the level of their functioning. Double colonization refers to women of colonized nations being doubly oppressed due to their race as well as their gender. It analyzes the concerns of women as members of marginalized groups within postcolonial societies, the case of indigenous minorities, and as women with a history of unbroken oppression.
3.4.4 From Margin to Centre

Postcolonial theory highlights the continued dominance of western ways of knowing. Like Gayatri Spivak, Joanne Sharp (2008) also argues that while western ways of knowing are accepted as the single voice of authenticity, other forms of knowing are marginalized by western thinkers since these are often relegated as myth or folklore. Postcolonial theorists have challenged western ways of knowing and writing, and this “single voiced authority” (Kalpana, 2003).

Feminist Theory: from Margin to Centre (1984) authored by African-American feminist and cultural critic, bell hooks, is an important book in the counter-canon of feminism. The importance of this work lies in the fact that it foregrounds and centers the black woman’s point of view which had hitherto been in the “footnotes” of patriarchal discourses. When referring to issues of women, bell hooks observes that within feminism there are displaced postcolonial notions and there is an urge to move to centre stage. Postcolonial feminist theories comprehend not only feminism of the third but also other marginalized peoples in the world. Postcolonial feminist theory uses the interconnections between gender, ethnicity, race and postcolonial history to draw attention to the issues of the marginalized.

Political oppression and patriarchy are the main planks of postcolonial theories. Colonization and its material effects arising from dominant power structure were brought out both historically and culturally in postcolonial theory. Firstly, there are questions of relationship between western feminism and postcolonial people. Gayatri Spivak questions the prominence given to European cultural notions and values in western feminism. Secondly, the issue of language is a significant one since the bulk of postcolonial studies has been mainly in English. Language implies power. Third world writings used in western universities are primarily those written originally in English, even though translations from indigenous to dominant language and vice versa have recently provided a wider reader circle. Thirdly, postcolonial theory has enabled third world intellectuals to participate in global discourse. Although postcolonial experiences vary widely depending on each culture’s specific history and culture, the discourse of postcolonialism has enabled all of these voices to find a central and powerful plank from which to share their common as well as different experiences.

3.4.5 Parallelism and Intersection

Postcolonial and feminist theories are parallel and convergent, and they intersect each other. Through symbolism of women and their sharing of
oppression and repression with colonized races and culture as colonized, western feminist theory and postcolonial theory run parallel to each other. Both feminist discourse and post-colonial theory have long been thought of as associative and even complementary. Possible similarities between the two can be summed up as follows:

Both discourses are predominantly political and concern themselves with the struggle against oppression and injustice. Moreover, both reject the established hierarchical, patriarchal system, which is dominated by the hegemonic white male, and vehemently deny the supposed supremacy of masculine power and authority. Imperialism, like patriarchy, is after all a phallocentric, supremacist ideology that subjugates and dominates its subjects. The oppressed woman is in this sense akin to the colonized subject. Essentially, exponents of post-colonialism are reacting against colonialism in the political and economic sense while feminist theorists are rejecting colonialism of a sexual nature.

Further, the role of the intrusive ‘male gaze’ within both patriarchy and colonialism, defines women and natives in an equally oppressive manner. Both groups - women and colonized - are reduced to stereotypes (virgin, whore, savage, heathen) and denied an identity by the system that entraps them. For example, Zemon Davis (2003, p.135-160) identified striking similarities in the position of the Iroquois (original American Indian people) and white women in the colonial encounter. In addition to focusing on gender, postcolonial feminist theories examine the varied forms of exploitation not only at the level of government but on the ground level as well. As similar theories, both question the established hegemonic hierarchical system. A convergence of the two may be identified in their common focus on the marginalized and silenced, in relation to the dominant.

Check Your Progress: In what ways do the main characteristics of postcolonial feminism point to some main objections and critiques of western feminism by postcolonial feminists? Can you think of examples which would support the claims and critiques made by postcolonial feminists?
3.5 POSTCOLONIAL AND FEMINIST THEORISTS

Postcolonial feminists attempt to change the oppressive power relations encoded in the name of race, nation, and empire. They are especially concerned with issues of gender, class, and sexuality. Postcolonial feminist theories are inter-disciplinary and cut across the disciplines of philosophy, political science, human geography, sociology, economics, literature, and media. Notable postcolonial theorists include Franz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and Chandra Mohanty, with the latter two more specifically addressing issues of gender. Postcolonial feminist theory has a two-fold objective: (i) to racialise mainstream feminist theory and (ii) to genderise colonialism and post colonialism. Let us now look at the main ideas of a few postcolonial and feminist theorists whose work has been extremely influential in the area of postcolonial feminist studies.

3.5.1 Edward Said: Orientalism

Orientalism formed the basis for postcolonial theorization. The ‘orient’ refers to countries east of the Mediterranean. Historically, the term ‘orient’ meant the oldest colonies of the Europeans extending from India to the Far East. In orientalist discourse, cultural differences from the west were sexualized to categorize the oriental women (including Indian women) and contrasted with the superiority of the European women. In his famous book Orientalism (1978), Edward Said contends that orientalism or the study of the orient is ultimately a political vision which promotes a binary opposition between the familiar West and the strange East, the inferior ‘other’. Said has thus paved the way for a new critique of colonialist thought and development, a new area of enquiry, a colonial discourse. Said attributes a definite meaning to orientalism as follows: “Orientalism is a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the orient” (Said, 1978).

Orientalism has thus become an academic discipline - referred to as Oriental Studies or Area Studies and denotes teaching, writing, and research on the orient in the varied disciplines of anthropology, sociology, history, philology, etc. Europeans systematically developed Orientalism in order to manage and produce the orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively.

Said adopted a different methodology by adapting Michel Foucault’s notion of discourse and the close relationship between power and knowledge. According to Foucault (Archaeology of Knowledge, 1969), establishment of knowledges and disciplines is never innocent. Knowledge formation is also formation of power. Said observes that ‘ideas, cultures and histories cannot be understood
or studied without their force’. They are relative to power. Therefore, power relations become the backdrop of the study of history and culture.

In his theory of orientalism, Edward Said examines how the knowledges created by various orientalist disciplines have produced a discourse of questionable originality. Those orientalist discourses are responsible for the creation of the category ‘other’, the oriental as the binary opposite of the west. Conceptually, oriental women are different from their western counterparts.

By redefining Oriental Studies and such western scholarship as orientalism, Said demonstrated its domination as a viewpoint over the oriental territories and people. Oriental scholars mostly produced discourses or texts depicting the East as West’s inferior ‘other’ and itself as a superior civilization in their work in literature, political tracts, journalistic texts, travel books, religious and philological studies. Said consistently demonstrates western domination through the power of knowledge.

In another publication *Culture and Imperialism* (1983), Said pays close attention to anti-colonial and postcolonial writing. Said’s theory of Orientalism is ultimately a political vision of reality exposing the binary opposition between the West and East, Europe and Orient. Said’s contribution to postcolonial criticism is immense and his work has served as a starting point for those who came after him. Said’s ideas have generated widespread interest and influence in English literature, history, comparative literature, anthology, sociology and enabled a very considerable amount of subsequent work, especially in terms of feminist intersections with postcolonial theory.

Racism, even after the disappearance of colonization, still continues to mar public life with incidents of racial violence. Similarly, postcolonial feminist theory questions the exclusion of race in the analysis of women. Edward Said’s work has been extremely influential in this regard since it opened up many questions which were taken up by postcolonial feminists in their ongoing struggle against racism and discrimination within the feminist movement.

3.5.2 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Can the Subaltern Speak?

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is a cultural critic and feminist theorist of Indian origin. Her much quoted essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” is considered to be one of the most important texts in postcolonial feminist theory. “Subaltern” originally means a commissioned army officer of lower rank than a captain, but the word has now entered the vocabulary of academic discourse, especially in cultural studies, to imply a subject who is marginalized and oppressed. As used in cultural studies, the term subaltern owes its source to Antonio Gramsci.
Referring to herself as a Marxist, feminist-deconstructionist, Spivak questions the tendency of scholarly writings to exclude and marginalize the subalterns and especially those who happen to be women. Gayatri Spivak is, therefore, hailed as a pioneer in the area of literary and cultural theory for producing the most coherent account of the subaltern woman. In her work, Spivak exposes how major works of European metaphysics (eg. Hegel, Kant, etc) not only tend to exclude the subaltern from discussions but also actively prevent non-Europeans from occupying positions as full human subjects. Since women’s groups may have different and changing needs and agendas, working for a common cause may become difficult. Moreover, such groups run the risk of becoming permanently identified with an essential and stable identity which may not be useful over a period of time. Spivak thus proposes the use of ‘strategic essentialism’ to enable women to fight for their rights from a political platform, without becoming permanently tied down to such a position or frozen identity. Spivak combines deconstructive theory with feminist and Marxist perspectives in her discourse on third world women within a global framework.

The ‘new knowledge’ of the subaltern has thus created drastic revision in conceptualization and theorizing on women. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak identifies postcolonial Indian women with a radical and economic underclass. She evokes the Hindu woman’s subaltern position, her inaccessibility to ‘voice’ and her ‘silenced difficult space of abjection.’ Since women are twice colonized, the most oppressed of these women can be seen to be in the position of the subaltern. Spivak observes that there is no space from where the subaltern subject can speak. Spivak persistently critiques western feminism which fails to reexamine its own assumptions and takes them for granted. She comments that the west’s intervention on behalf of the subaltern women is self interested. The feminist framework constructed by her has been fruitfully extended by other writers.

### 3.5.3 Homi K. Bhabha: The Subaltern Can Speak

Another postcolonial theorist, Homi K. Bhabha agrees with Spivak that the colonial (subaltern) is represented only within a disabling master discourse of colonialism. Such a discourse justifies itself by stressing on the degenerating nature of native population. Bhabha asserts that (woman) subaltern people can speak and that a native (woman’s) voice can be recovered and is recovered.
in the readings of colonial texts and discourses, depending on reading strategies. Bell Ashcroft et al support Bhabha’s views. “The existence of postcolonial discourse is an example of postcolonial speaking and in most cases the dominant language is appropriated and is used for representation” (Ashcroft, 1995). The marginal voice, in fact, is heard.

Said’s *Orientalism* laid emphasis on imperialist discourses. In more recent times, there has been a growing focus on the previously neglected contributions of postcolonial voices who challenge oriental discourse and its domination. There are considerable texts as histories from below, recovering the experience of those hitherto hidden from history. These articulations are not all completely new either. Marxists feminists and even liberal historians, whose *leitmotif* was the masses, have tried to ‘amplify the voices’ of the oppressed over the years. In this respect, the theory of discourse of Bhabha (1994) gains significance.

### 3.5.4 Chandra Talpade Mohanty: Third World Feminist

According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty, there is a difference between woman as constructed by ‘diverse representational discourses’ and women as real material subjects of histories. They are related only arbitrarily. Western feminist writings have ‘colonized’ the material and historical heterogeneities of women in third world in the form a homogenous ‘third world woman’.

This western feminist framework is critiqued by Mohanty. The first criticism focuses on strategies, location, or situation of women vis-à-vis the content analysis. Women of power and struggle are assumed as an already constituted group with identical interests and desires. The second critique is on the methodology by which universality and cross cultural validity are proved. The third concerns the political framework of the model. In short, generalizing and universalizing of women as a category is the major criticism made by postcolonial feminists. The representation of third world women as traditional, feudal, and politically immature are challenged by Mohanty.

In support of her critique, Chandra Mohanty uses examples of western feminists’ representation of veiling (as a proxy for sexual segregation and control of women). This allows western feminist discourse to view third world women only in relation to negative aspects of their lives such as rape, domestic violence, forced prostitution, and violation of basic human rights. Similarly, she cites the emphasis on concepts like reproduction, sexual division of labour, the family, marriage, household, patriarchy, etc which are used by western feminists without specifying local, cultural, and historical contexts to represent women’s subordination. Additionally, she challenges the confusion of the use of gender with an analytical category in western feminist writings.
In sum, Chandra Mohanty strikes a blow at the monolithic, generalized representation of third world women. In particular, she warns against ‘freezing the women in time, space and history’. She deconstructs the notion of a universalized sisterhood by documenting the experiences by women of colour in different societies including the dual system of discrimination articulated by male and female patriarchy.

### 3.5.5 Feminism in India: Silent and Steady

The common thread running through Indian feminism is that of a liberal position. Whatever is progressive for women in the west may not necessarily the best for women in India. The Indian feminist approach has been to ‘observe, describe, take an objective realistic view’ of women’s conditions in their social set up. They question the double marginalization of illiterate, tribal and rural women as much as advocating their mainstreaming.

One could say that there are roughly three main bodies of writings on women in India - colonial western, Indian nationalist feminist and current writings. The framework of Indian postcolonialism is essentially Marxist, with emphasis on the low caste, tribal, and what Gandhi termed as ‘underdogs’. Its added concerns are peasantry and matters relating to agency, gender, and psychology. Non-orthodox concepts have also emerged in recent theoretical work which constructs a dialogue with international perspectives. Spivak and Bhabha’s abstract works are best understood (subaltern studies group) in relation to the problem of Indian intellectual culture and its political history. Much of theoretical innovation on feminism took place simultaneously in India and by Indian intellectuals outside India who “created a dynamic field of intellectual energy providing much of the cuttings of postcolonial theory effectively by chalking out its parameters” (Young, 2001, p. 351).

Whereas feminist ideology stemmed from individualism in the West, in India, its impact was class based, silent but steady. Feminism in India is taking deep inroads without much of the hue and cry of the western feminists. Indian writers analyse various complex problems of contemporary life by examining indigenous way role relations and identities. This includes Indian writings in English as well as vernacular regional writings.

To sum up, postcolonial theory contradicts a universalized, homogenous concept of women and the exclusion of race in the analysis. Racial, cultural, and gendered oppressions have negated the right to equality. Decolonization in the metaphorical sense is the essence of postcolonial feminism. It goes beyond mere specificity and historic location. It includes a methodological revisionism. The centrality of western thought, construction of knowledge and production
Postcolonial feminism (writings) are challenged. Such revisions provide the framework for postcolonial feminist theory.

3.6 POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST THEORY: A CRITIQUE

Postcolonial feminist theory is overburdened with abstractions. It has been criticized for not paying adequate attention to concrete issues and the concerns of activists. However, there are currently increasing number feminist writings which do focus consistently on the ‘particularities and political positions’ within the postcolonial context.

Western campaigns against victimization of indigenous women through a unitary focus on symbols of oppression such as the forcible implementation of ‘sati’ and ‘veiling’ have come under question in postcolonial feminist theory. The same symbolisms are shown to have been sometimes used as a way of resistance to colonialism and oppression. Postcolonial feminist theory shows that issues and struggles are relative and contextual and need to be looked at within specific historical and cultural frameworks. For instance, the freedom of reproductive rights (the choice to carry through a pregnancy or the right to have an abortion) has been a key issue in western women’s struggle. Forced contraception, however, becomes a major issue in Black women’s struggle. The issue of human rights becomes more central to indigenous women’s movements. The instance of Algerian women ‘veiled, unveiled and revealed’ has the bewildering effect of questioning oriental binaries. Cultural differences are relentlessly sexualized. Postcolonial feminist theory confronts western feminists with the diversity of indigenous women’s lives and experiences and the impossibility of one group of women having any necessary immediate access to other’s experiences. The distance between women as groups has to be acknowledged. The main inference is that indigenous women are diverse, and that diversity needs to respected, even as we fight towards certain common goals.

Further, western feminist theorists have sidelined the issue of race. Race has a central place in postcolonial studies. Postcolonial feminist theory includes theorizing of race and ethnicity and the analysis of gender issues to account for human variations in terms of culture, tradition, social patterns, and ancestry. The inertia to face the problem of race by western feminism in called “white guilt”. The relative ignorance of the situation of indigenous women is highlighted by postcolonial feminism. Spivak, for instance, has called for white feminists to know more about the rest of the world and to recognize that all third world women are not universally oppressed, held in purdah, uneducated and abused by their husbands and male relatives. Western
feminism held itself as the campaigner for indigenous women. Their interest was in reforming natives, savages and protecting brown women from brown men. But this approach called ‘white women’s burden’ obscures the other violence’s of colonial and post colonial power and distracts attention away from other crucial and pressing issues like human and material development.

In conclusion, ‘postcolonial studies’ at best refers to a body of diverse and contesting writings. It is not a discipline or methodology. *The Empires Writes Back* aptly demonstrated that it is a creation of literary study. Whether it is viewed as a historical context, as an analytical tool, or as a theory of cultural relations, the validity of the postcolonial lies in its efficacy. How well it has empowered postcolonial intellectuals and enabled the strategy of decolonization is a moot question. Postcoloniality articulates along with economic, social, cultural and historical factors, in practice it works differently in different parts of the world. It conveys patriarchy as a relationship of inequality that is highly variable because it is to be considered always with the other social structures. We need caution and qualification when using the term postcolonialism.

3.7 LET US SUM UP

As you may have noted in your reading of this unit, it is necessary to situate any feminist theory within a particular cultural context. This emphasis is reiterated by Indian feminists as well as all other third world theorists. Chandra Mohanty and Rachel Carby laid the foundational critique against naturalizing all women’s oppression without regard to cultural differences. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that politics in one arena can act as colonizing agent in another. Double colonization by both imperial and patriarchal set up is adequately theorized. Kamala Das writing on the position of Indian woman captures the identity of feminist writers and their relation to male society without reference to race and class. Feminist theories in India can be discerned from many women writers in India through their decoding of gender roles.

Feminist critical analysis of institutions and practices point to the systemic and systematic nature of the problem they focus on. Discrimination, exploitation, exclusion, harassment, abuse and violence against women are matters of general concern and public debate. These mistreatments are significantly rooted in particular practices and institutional arrangements imbedded in Indian culture and tradition. Certainly, there is a variety of ongoing changes and their mainstreaming is the major focus. Yet, the powerlessness of women is apparent. In the final analysis, women anywhere are in the structure of power and men rate them inferior, superior or equal as the
situations demand (Markandaya, 1954). Our future and its progress depend on the equality of men and women. It has to be pursued and sustained.

### 3.8 GLOSSARY

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Subaltern</td>
<td>It means a subordinate officer of lower rank. Any submissive subject without power of his/her own is addressed as a subaltern. The marginalized are the subalterns.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Colonialism</td>
<td>It refers to the policy of having colonies to keep them dependent. It implies domination over its subjects. As a theoretical concept, it implies domination and oppression.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Postcolonialism</td>
<td>The lasting impact of colonialism even after independence from imperial powers is called postcolonialism. It is a broad concept covering individual, geographic, historical and cultural specifications. In this unit, postcolonialism specifically refers to issues of cultural diversity, ethnic, racial and cultural differences and the power relations within the postcolonial/liberated people.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orientalism</td>
<td>Orientalism (oriental studies) refers to western scholarship in eastern languages and its cultures across disciplines. Knowledge means power. According to Edward Said Orientalism denotes a western style of domination.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Third World</td>
<td>The terms North and South are used to emphasize the contrast between the developed and developing countries. Third world is coterminous with developing countries - Africa, Asia and Latin America. Third world also symbolizes the historical and cultural suppression of those countries.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Double Colonization</td>
<td>It refers to two forms of domination simultaneously like imperialism/colonialism and patriarchy/oppression. It concerns the marginalized within the suppressed groups.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multiculturalism</td>
<td>Many distinct cultural groups coexist within one society without prejudice or discrimination.</td>
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3.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) “The common thread of oppression runs through all categories of feminism.” Discuss this statement based on your reading of feminist theories.

2) Explain the binaries of oriental-western, East-West and us-other.


4) How are women of the third world heterogenous? Are all western women homogenous? Are all women ‘sisters in struggle’? Discuss these questions with the help of what you have read above.

5) Explain the goals of postcolonial feminism. Relate some of these to the contributions of some of the main postcolonial theorists that you have read about in the above unit.

6) In what ways is postcolonial feminism a challenge to western feminism?

7) “Feminism in India is making a tremendous impact with less noise and drama than the west”. What are the justifications for this statement?

3.10 REFERENCES


### 3.11 SUGGESTED READINGS


