UNIT 2  WAYS OF WRITING

Structure

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

2.2 OBJECTIVES

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

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

2.3 WRITING GENDER

What do we mean by ‘writing’? Does it emanate exclusively from the writer? Or is writing the result of a far more complex negotiation that takes place between the writer and her readers - both actual and projected? These questions are important when we discuss the construction of gender via writing as we need to understand how exactly gender norms are perpetrated, challenged or recreated in literature. The term author - with its obvious connotation of authority - is a contested category in the present time. In an influential essay entitled “Death of the Author” published in 1967, the French theorist Roland Barthes argued against limiting the reading of the text to the intentions of the author and made a persuasive case for broadening the focus of creativity to language and readers. Barthes meant to liberate the text from the authority of the Author-God, inviting the reader to ‘disentangle’ the text in order to create its meaning ‘here and now’. To quote from his conclusion:
“Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations to dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted.” (Barthes, 1967)

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

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

By the sixties and seventies feminist writers started to theorise about the distinguishing characteristics of women’s writing. Elaine Showalter’s “A Literature of their Own” (1977) is a case in point. Showalter discusses women’s writing as a subculture based on female solidarity arising from secretive and ritualised physical experiences. She shows the evolution of women’s literature, starting from the Victorian period to modern writing. She breaks down the movement into three stages – the Feminine, a period of imitation, beginning with the use of the male pseudonym in the 1840s, ending with George Eliot’s death in 1880; the Feminist, characterised by resistance, that she traces from 1880 till the winning of the vote in 1920;
and the Female, one of self-discovery, from 1920 till the present-day, including a “new stage of self-awareness about 1960.” Showalter also coined the term ‘gynocritics’ to suggest “the scholarship concerned with woman as the producer of textual meaning with the history, themes, genres, and structures of literature by women” (Showalter, 1977, p. 244).

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

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

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

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

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

Check Your Progress 1:

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

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

Box 2.2

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

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

The recipe for the woman writer’s liberation that Woolf provided in her celebrated essay has become a cliché: a room of one’s own and a private income. But this solution may seem too bourgeois to some. As the African American writer Alice Walker pointed out, many women, African American slave women particularly, attempted to write their liberation without even owning their own bodies (Walker, 1983, p. 670)
Besides, many women, especially those not in the Anglo-American mainstream, discovered that finding a place in the literary universe is not a matter of financial autonomy or what is recognised as modernity alone. In their introduction to *Women’s Writing in India from 600 BC*, Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha outline the fascinating story of a collection of poems (*Radhika Santwanam* or Appeasing Radhika) that was written by a courtesan called Muddupalani in mid eighteenth century. Muddupalani was a well-regarded poet in the Thanjavur period of Telugu literature. But her work that celebrated Radhika’s sexuality in a clever subversion of the classical form (where Krishna is the dominant lover and Radhika, only the passive beloved), was all but lost by the beginning of the twentieth century. It was with great difficulty that Nagratnamma - a patron of the arts, musician and distinguished courtesan, herself - was able to excavate the full text and reprint it in 1910. An unexpected furore greeted the publication of the text in colonial India and social reformers attacked it for its explicitness. The British government banned it. It was only in 1947 after the intervention of the Chief Minister that the ban could be lifted, and the text reissued. But once again, Tharu and Lalitha note, *Radhika Santwanam* faced similar criticism and ostracism on grounds of “obscenity” in independent India. When they tried to locate the full text, several Telugu scholars assured them that their efforts were misplaced as the text had little or no literary merit. Tharu and Lalitha foreground this story as an allegory of women’s writing in the country. *Radhika Santwanam*, in their opinion, remains a transgressive text till date as it focuses on the sexual assertions of a woman. The intellectually evolved Thanjavur court could find place for it but, subsequently in the nineteenth century when the British were imposing Victorian morality on the subject race, or in the national and nationalistic period when the nation was being deified as a woman such writings would be considered suspect if not outright dangerous. It is not only ‘tradition’ or ‘ignorance’ that put constraints on women; ironically, notions of nationhood and social progress may also militate against women’s writing.

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

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

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

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

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

Box 2.3

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

Yet, Walker argues from the vantage point of her mother’s accomplishment as a gardener of unusual creativity, their spirit was never broken. Black women have been giving expression to their creativity in various ways - quilt-making, gardening, cooking. These ‘Artists’, Walker claims, are the progenitors of black women’s writing; certainly not white male writers who make up the Anglo-American canon. However, Walker makes extensive use of spirituality in her theorisation that, according to some critics, blunts the
revolutionary point that she is making about the value of women’s work. But it can hardly be denied that Walker’s ‘Womanism’ with its focus on the solidarity of the Black community is a strong alternative to white feminism and greatly subverts conventional ideas about ‘Literature’ and ‘writing’, tracing the origin of women’s writing to humble homely chores black women performed in contrast with the musty intellection of white male writers.

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

2.6 I AM NOT A WOMAN WRITER

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

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

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

The denial may also serve to:

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

These women writers have found that denial of their subjectivity (as women) is necessary if they want to be taken seriously as writers. The great twentieth-century American poet Elizabeth Bishop, for instance, refused to be included
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in anthologies of women’s poetry, insisting that she was a poet plain and simple, rather than a “woman poet.” She wrote that “art is art and to separate writings, paintings, musical compositions, etc. into two sexes is to emphasize values that are not art.” Echoing Roland Barthes’s position on writers and writing, another major French writer of Russian Jewish origin, Nathalie Sarraute, snarled in an interview: “When I write I am neither man nor woman nor dog nor cat.” (Moi, 2005, p. 123) The claim of impersonality that these women are making as writers is a political act and should be seen as such.

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

**Box 2.4**

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

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

**Check Your Progress 2:**

If you were a writer, would you like to be known as a ‘woman’ or a ‘man’ writer? Why or why not? Think about the various issues before writing your response.
2.7 GENRE, GENDER AND MARKET

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

Box 2.5

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

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

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

Box 2.6

“A couple of years ago, British author Ian McEwan conducted an admittedly unscientific experiment. He and his son waded into the lunch-time crowds at a London park and began handing out free books. Within a few minutes, they had given away 30 novels. Nearly all of the takers were women, who were “eager and grateful” for the freebies while the men “frowned in suspicion, or distaste.” The inevitable conclusion, wrote McEwan in The Guardian newspaper: “When women stop reading, the novel will be dead” (Weiner, 2007, September 5)
Does the realization on the part of writers and publishers that the reading public is overwhelmingly female lead to more gender sensitive writing or writing by women? Messud complains: “Here’s the deal: men, without thinking, will almost without fail select men. And women, without thinking, will too often select men” (Messud, 2010, February 1). One needs to emphasize that sexist cultural expectations are shared by women writers and readers as well. One may come across cases of women readers prioritising the male vision simply because they’ve been conditioned to do so in a sexist society. As Tharu and Lalitha point out in their introduction to Women’s Writing in India: “Women writers - critics and editors of anthologies no less - are clearly as imbricated in the ideologies of their times as men are; patriarchies take shape and are transformed in specific historical circumstances. Not all literature written by women is feminist or even about women. Neither is the scope of women’s writing restricted to allegories of gender oppression” (Tharu and Lalitha, 1991, p.38).

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

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

Romance and chick lit mark out a women-only zone that is upper-class and chic and qualitatively different from the kind of women writing that, say, Tharu and Lalitha excavated and compiled in their path breaking volumes or Alice Walker traced and discussed in her essay. The political value of
these genres is not obvious and a lot of critics dismiss them as escapism. However, some feminist critics argue that by marking out a zone that is exclusively for women these highly commercialised genres do create some space for women’s concerns. A very persuasive case, for instance, was made by the feminist critic Janice A. Radway who discussed popular romance as a way for many middle-class and middle-aged women readers to come to terms with the neglect and violence they suffered at the hands of their male partners. Thus, even though the romantic heroes of popular romances may seem like stereotypes of ‘manly’ men, the very act of reading the romance was for many women readers ‘a declaration of independence’. Many romances, Radway points out, are premised on the magical transformation of the hero from an uncaring brute to a tender partner due to ‘true love’ (Radway, 1984, p.148). The structure of the romance functions, according to Radway, as a “utopian wish-fulfillment fantasy,” a dream-world that offers substitute satisfactions that make the woman feel worthy and alive (Radway, 1984, p. 151).

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

2.8 LET US SUM UP

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

1) Discuss the relationship between the author and the notion of ‘authority’ in the realm of literature, as used by Ronald Barthes.

2) Evaluate the concept of woman as a writer in the literary world.

3) Justify the acceptance of and/or resistance to the label ‘woman writer’ by woman themselves.

4) How does the market impact of role of gender in literature?

2.10 REFERENCES


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### 2.11 SUGGESTED READINGS
