UNIT 3 CRITICAL APPROACHES

Ways of Writing

3.1 INTRODUCTION

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

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

3.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, you will be able to:

• Discuss critical approaches to literature;

• Describe the relationship between gender, reading and interpreting;
3.3 BACKGROUND

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

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

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

3.4 CRITICAL APPROACHES TO LITERATURE AND GENDER

“I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is”, remarked the well known author, Rebecca West, “I only know that other people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate
me from a doormat or prostitute” (Guerin, 2005, p. 222). Feminism involves a crucial set of distinctions between the terms ‘feminist’ (a political position), ‘female’ (matter of biology) and ‘feminine’ (set of culturally defined characteristics’ (Moi, 2001, p. 266). The complex and crucial negotiations between these terms, especially the relationship between the biological (therefore natural) and the cultural raises questions of socialisation and conditioning and is an important area of discussion in gender studies. Feminism/s, it is now widely accepted, include/s more than a single set of approaches, assumptions and definitions and has gone far beyond being a theory propounded by white heterosexual women to express resistance to patriarchy. Further the term ‘feminism’ is increasingly referred to as gender studies, which is often the preferred term in critical discourse as it reflects the focus on the construction and formation of gender and sexualities across cultures.

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

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

The initial efforts of feminist critics led to the anthologizing of women’s writings in several genres, which included slave narratives, personal memoirs, diaries, letters and autobiographies (e.g. The Norton Anthology of Women’s Writing/Poetry). In the academic context there also emerged a substantial body of critical work that looked at questions of reading and interpretation as well as the anxieties of authorship that assailed the work of women writers. The pioneering classic published in 1979 by Gilbert and Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic, studied both canonical and non-canonical works by women writers of the nineteenth century like Charlotte Bronte and Christina Rossetti, focusing on the deviant figures and relationships in literary texts as expressions of the anxieties of authorship and the authors’ repressed rage and frustration . Gilbert and Gubar suggested that figures like that of Bertha Mason in Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre function as a ‘doppelganger’ or ‘dark double’ to ventilate feelings of anger and helplessness experienced by women writers in a patriarchal society. Similarly, Showalter turned the spotlight on women writers in her account of ‘gynocriticism’ outlined in The New Feminist Criticism (1985) (Gilbert, Gubar, 1984, 359-362). Gynocriticism focused on the study of women as writers and on the “history, styles,
themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition” (Showalter, 1985, p.307). Women’s literature is an “imaginative continuum [of] certain patterns, themes, problems and images, from generation to generation” (Showalter, 1985, p. 11). She formulates analytical approaches to women’s writing by outlining four models of difference: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytical and cultural. In doing so, she covers a wide swathe of critical approaches to literature and gender.

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

Showalter's linguistic model asserts the alienation of women trapped in “man-made language” which chokes and silences them. Countering sexism in language is not enough; women’s writing and criticism has to subvert this linguistic domination and appropriate the resources of language to express the inner realities and feelings of women. Tillie Olsen in Silences (1978) cites “mute inglorious Miltons whose working hours are all struggle for existence” which arise from being born “into the wrong class, race or sex, being denied education, becoming numbed by economic struggle, muzzled by censorship or distracted or impeded by the demands of nurturing” (Olsen, 2003, p.10). However, Olsen also says that silence can be posed as resistance to “the dominant discourse” such as Emily Dickinson’s “slant truths” and the inner dialogues of quiet characters such as Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre or Virginia Woolf’s Lily Briscoe (Guerin, 2005, p.225). Many critics have viewed language, its use and practice, as a site and marker of gender difference and have identified the use of associational rather than linear logic, free play of meaning and a lack of closure, the preference for certain domestic ‘genres’ such as letters and diaries, with the feminine. The
challenge for feminists, is to reinvent language, to speak not only against, but “outside of the specular phallogocentric structure to establish the status of which would no longer be defined by the phallacy of masculine meaning” (Felman, 1975, p.3-10).

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

The models of difference enumerated here (based on the biological, linguistic and psychoanalytical) hinge on essentialist arguments and have been critiqued by third wave or poststructuralist feminists. Broadly opposed to the essentialist model is the constructionist or constructivist model which stresses on the culturally constructed nature of gender attributes. Showalter’s cultural model for exploring difference is a particularly productive one and includes a broad spectrum of Marxist and socialist approaches to studying literature and gender. As Showalter points out a gynocentric criticism must “plot the precise locus of female literary identity and describe the forces that intersect a woman writer’s cultural field” (Showalter, 1985, p.324). These forces include locations of race, class, gender, socio-historical context. Gynocentric criticism would also attempt to situate women with respect to “variables of literary culture, such as modes of production and distribution, relations
of author and audience, relations of high art to popular art” (Showalter, 1985, p.324). As a matter of fact, cultural studies and cultural criticism have emerged as disciplines to study gender through the filter of culture. Additionally, historians like Gerda Lerner and Joan W. Scott explore the idea of a woman’s culture as the foundation for a revisionist, woman-centred enquiry of the past (Kelly, 1979, p.145-180).

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

**Check Your Progress 1:**

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

### 3.4.1 Ways of Reading and Interpreting

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

A criticism which is sensitive to the political implications and institutional practices of canon-building would encourage a resistant reading, a reading against the grain of established critical tenets. This is particularly important since critical norms have been institutionalized by an academic establishment which is primarily male. The relationship between a phallocentric canon and androcentric modes of reading is a symbiotic one (Schweickart, 1986, p. 433). Reading habits, moreover, are taught and since literature is a social institution, “reading is a highly socialized-or learned- activity” what we choose to read and teach and ‘canonize’, usually follows upon our previous reading (Kolodny, 1980, p. 20). Feminist critics who attempt to combine the insights of reader-response criticism to the ideological framework of feminist theory point to a dual critical praxis. As Schweickart elucidates, “the critique of androcentric reading practices is essential, for it opens up some ideological space for the recuperation of women’s writing” (Schweickart, 1986, p.427).

In other words the stance adopted by the feminist reader of the male text will be resisting and adversarial, while the stance vis-à-vis a woman-authored text would be recuperative. The purpose of a resistant reading is both to examine the subversions and resistance implicit in women’s writing and develop reading strategies which resonate with feminist concerns and experiences. In this case the resistance is not to the text but to patriarchal misreadings and misinterpretations.

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

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

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

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

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

The concept of difference is defined by Julian Wolfreys as both “political and ontological,” that “which makes possible any meaning or identity” since it derives from the “political and ontological necessity of recognizing that different groupings (for example women, nonwhite and people of colour, gays and lesbians) not only differ from the white heterosexual norm, but also differ among themselves: women, for example, may be middle-class or working class, Black or Asian, straight or gay or bi, and/or any combination of any set of attributes” (Wolfreys, 2004, p.58). Thus, although many nonwhite theorists include “each other in shared analyses of oppression, and while most feminisms have aligned themselves with arguments against
racism, xenophobia, and homophobia,” (Guerin, et al, 2005, p.2-3) there is a strong protest against homogenization of any kind. The issue of difference is a complex one since each minority group has its own issues and concerns, which, they argue, cannot be collapsed with those of others. The case of black feminists or ‘womanists’ can be furnished as an example of a differential framework. The use of the term womanist distinguishes feminists of colour; and the term was used by the writer Alice Walker to indicate a kind of feminism that does not always necessarily turn its back on the men of the same community.

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

The critical work of black women theorists aimed to deconstruct stereotypes of lesbians as unnatural and sexless, and to redeem a hitherto neglected tradition of lesbian thought and writing (Habib, 2008, p.139). They saw lesbianism as the purest form of feminism since it asserted female autonomy and refused all forms of complicity with all forms of masculinist exploitation (Habib, 2008, p.139). The lesbian feminist poet and theorist Adrienne Rich saw lesbianism as a kind of “archetypal image” of the broad feminist agenda, and pressed for a dissociation of lesbian from male gay allegiances. Her powerful essay entitled “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980) talks of the “lesbian continuum” to indicate a range of experiences between women, including political support, bonding against male tyranny, and sharing a rich inner life (Habib, 2008, p.139).
The idea of a separatist lesbianism has also been advocated by Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands-La Frontera* (1987) by Monique Wittig in *The Lesbian Body* (1973) and Luce Irigaray’s *The Sex Which Is Not One*, published in 1985. Anzaldúa’s work has opened up radically new ways of thinking about identity, experience and intersectionality. Mainstream notions of gender and culture are interrogated as the marginal destabilizes the dominant paradigms.

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

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

**Check Your Progress 2:**

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

### 3.4.3 Post-structuralism and the Question of Gender

Along with cultural studies and related areas like gender and media studies, has come the poststructuralist challenge to questions of sex and gender, questions of representation and representability. Influenced by the works of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and other avant-garde theorists like Jacques Lacan and Jean Lyotard, poststructuralist theorists put forward the idea that identities are created in and through language and discourse. (You will read about Derrida’s work in greater detail in the next and last unit of this block). Further there is no essence or core to gender and any ideas of an interior core of gender is an illusion and a fabrication to conceal the politics of its discursive origin (Habib 2008, p. 143). According to Judith Butler whose writings have had enormous influence on gender studies, the gendered body is performative; it has “no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (Butler, 1990, p.136). Citing the practices of drag artists who impersonate women, Butler observes that this behaviour frames and dramatizes the signifying gestures through which gender is produced. In deconstructing and radically destabilizing the category of woman, Butler points to the fluidity and social construction of gendered identities. Her thinking poses a challenge to any kind of essentialist feminism where the fixed and immutable category of woman is the starting point of inquiry and action: gender is produced by power structures and intersects with race, class, politics and culture (Butler, 1990, p.1-3). Using Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, Butler opines that there is no natural body prior to signification, the body is not a being but a surface which is the product of regimes of power and regulatory disciplines organised in such a way so as to produce a “fiction of heterosexual coherence” and fabricated unity.
Gender is, in this scheme, a stylized repetition of acts. Further, this characteristic of gender opens up “performative possibilities for gender configurations outside the restricting frame of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality” (Butler, 1990, p. 140).

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

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

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

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

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

3.6 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Discuss the contrast between the essentialist and constructivist views of gender, giving at least two features of each.

2) What are the four models of difference according to Showalter in *The New Feminist Criticism*?

3) Discuss Judith Butler’s ideas on gender and performance. How do these ideas radically destabilize the category of gender?

4) How is feminist criticism different from gender studies?

3.7 REFERENCES


Cranney-Francis, Anne et al (2003); *Gender Studies: Terms and Debates*


### 3.8 SUGGESTED READINGS