UNIT 4  FEMINISM AND DECONSTRUCTION

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4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous units of this block, you learnt how to critically analyze literary texts through a gendered lens. These units introduced you to alternative ways of reading, writing and criticism from feminist perspectives. Now that you have observed that there are various possible approaches to reading and appreciating literature, we will examine one particular approach which has been of utmost significance to feminist theorists in the last century. In this unit, you will read about the relations between feminism and deconstruction, and how feminists have been able to employ deconstructive strategies to advantage. We will begin by locating deconstruction within its historical literary context, and examine other movements, more specifically, Structuralism and Post-Structuralism, with which it is related. We will then try to explain the salient aspects of deconstruction and its relevance to feminism.
4.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- Understand the origin and place of deconstruction within the historical and literary context of the west;
- Speak knowledgably about Structuralism and Post-Structuralism as literary movements;
- Explain how deconstruction works and what it attempts to do;
- Explain the role of deconstructionist theorists, especially Jacques Derrida;
- Distinguish between the use of deconstruction in France and by Anglo-Americans;
- Understand the alignments between feminism and deconstruction in the west and in the third world;
- Explain the limitations of deconstruction as well as the contradictions between feminism and deconstruction; and
- Discuss the relevance of deconstruction from the point of view of feminism in India.

4.3 LOCATING DECONSTRUCTION IN LITERARY THEORY

You may have already come across the term “deconstruction” or the verb “to deconstruct” in everyday language, as it has now become quite common to speak about deconstructing a film, a novel, or even someone’s words! But where did the term “deconstruction” (which is a relatively new addition to the English language) come from? In literary theory and criticism, the term deconstruction refers to a method of opening up and dismantling the obvious meanings of a text in order to reveal hidden meanings and interpretations. These meanings may be easily missed on a cursory reading of a text as they may have been marginalized for various reasons which we will soon look at. A text whose various meanings have been deconstructed can then be put back together, or reconstructed, allowing for a fuller and more meaningful interpretation of the text, as well as of various factors which may be part of its context. However, in order to fully comprehend the place and significance of deconstruction, we would need to locate it in the context of literary theory and criticism, and to see it in relation to other literary movements. Deconstruction and Post Structuralism, often used interchangeably, actually refer to a methodology and a contemporaneous literary movement. Post Structuralism, as a movement, became popular during the period we now identify as postmodern, which roughly follows the
Modern period. The postmodern period is used to describe social and economic conditions after modernity, and is said to have emerged somewhere around the late 20th century. Many of the effects of postmodern cultural conditions get reflected in literary theory, especially in Post Structuralism. Before we attempt to comprehend the scope of Post Structuralism as a literary theory, we need to examine the movement which immediately precedes it. Let us therefore begin by looking at Structuralism.

4.3.1 Structuralism

4.3.1.1 From New Criticism to Structuralism

Up until the early part of the twentieth century, the most common way of reading a text was to treat the text as a closed, organic whole and to assume that any meaning to be derived from this text was already present within it, and could easily be identified if one was trained in the method of literary interpretation. For example, a teacher using a poem in a literature classroom may first introduce students to basic literary tropes such as images, symbols, metaphors and metonymy, as well as linguistic tools such as meter, rhyme and rhythm, which are commonly used by poets. Once the students are equipped with these tools of interpretation, the class might collectively attempt to unravel the various features of the poem, comment on the poet’s use of images and symbols, and try to produce a common understanding of the poem’s intended meanings. Perhaps you have attended a similar class yourself in school or in college, as the method is still quite commonly used to teach literature. This perspective which looks at a poem (or any literary text), as an organic whole which contains pre-determined meanings waiting to be unraveled by the astute, competent reader is part of the movement called “New Criticism.” Let us first try to understand the main aspects of this movement.

Perhaps disillusioned by the harsh economic and social realities imposed by the two wars in the first half of the twentieth century, the New Critics embraced literature and poetry as alternate sources of solace. The text became the locus of pleasure, and myth and poetry were especially favoured genres. The New Critics firmly believed that any work of literature was an autonomous entity and held all its possible interpretations within itself. It was up to the trained, competent reader to be able to find these meanings, and appreciate the literary techniques used by the poet. The New Critics, therefore, centered the role of the text, (and to a lesser extent, the poet/writer who puts the meanings into the poem), in literary activity. In England, critics like I.A Richards focused on ‘Practical Criticism,’ while in the 1930’s to 1950’s, American New Critics like John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, T.S. Eliot, Northrop Frye and Cleanth Brooks published books which charted out the realm and processes by which any literary text could be read. They thus assumed a universalism in literary texts, as it was presupposed that once
you have mastered a set of common tools for reading, you can unravel the meanings of any text placed before you. Although it may not have been obvious at the time, it soon became quite apparent that the ‘competent reader’ that the New Critics spoke about, was not just an average person on the street. Such a reader (usually male), had to have obtained his education in elitist western institutions (which implied he was usually a white upper-class male), as the literary training which was assumed to be possessed would normally be provided only at such institutions. The ‘objectivity’ and ‘universality’ of interpretations that New Criticism upheld was in fact exposed as a right wing, elitist western privilege possessed by those few who were fortunate enough to be born into a life of tradition and breeding. (This may ring true for you in the Indian context, too, where a familiarity with the English language, and English literary discourse, has for long been equated with a certain upper-class status which many hope to aim for.) Moreover, the absence of the role of any kind of context (cultural, gendered, racial, historical, etc.) in literary interpretation, soon made readers question the mastery of the New Critical perspective, and drew attention to its inherent limitations. By the middle of the twentieth century, in the background of anti-imperialist sentiments, independence movements in the third world, postcolonial consciousness, and rising socialist and feminist movements, New Criticism began to lose its traditional hold on the literature classroom.

### 4.3.1.2 Structuralism in Linguistics

At the same time, in the field of linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist had introduced some radical concepts in his theory of language study with the publication of his lecture notes under the title *Course in General Linguistics*, in 1916 (originally published in French). Saussure was a pioneer in linguistics, and was the first one to introduce the idea of signs as being made up of dual components - signifiers and signifieds. Let us look at what these terms mean. Quite simply put, any sign refers to a concept or an idea which we intend to represent. We use signifiers to represent these concepts (signifieds). For instance, we can use the signifiers ‘book,’ ‘kitab,’ ‘pustak,’ or ‘livre’ to refer to an identical concept, depending on which language we are using (English, Urdu, Hindi or French). The word with which we represent the intended meaning is the ‘signifier’ and the idea represented is the ‘signified.’ Saussure therefore showed that signs do not have essences (the signifier does not contain meaning but points towards it), and that they are defined by a network of relations (relations between signifiers and signifieds). We can produce and convey meaning because we belong to a common linguistic community, that is, because of certain shared conventions. These conventions are inherently arbitrary (there is no reason to call an orchid an orchid, we just do; however, if everyone using the English language agreed to call an orchid a tulip, the signifier would change, but the signified would remain the same, thus proving that there is no
natural connection between signifiers and signifieds.) By thus exposing the underlying structure of language, Saussure was able to show that:

- Meaning is the result of a system of shared conventions, and
- The relationships between signifiers and signifieds are arbitrary.

Additionally, Saussure showed that meaning is also the result of differences in phonemes. Linguists already spoke about language as consisting of minimal units of meaning (‘morphemes’) and minimal units of sounds (‘phonemes’). For instance, we understand that the signifiers ‘chair,’ ‘hair,’ ‘stair,’ ‘fair,’ and ‘mare’ all refer to different signifieds but this observation is possible because there is at least one minimal phonemic (sound) difference between all of them. If we were to replace the /h/ phoneme in ‘hair’ with the /st/ phoneme, it would become impossible to distinguish the meanings between ‘hair’ and ‘stair’. This idea of meaning arising from minimal differences between any two sound units forms the crux of the theory of structuralist linguistics. The two opposing elements which are different in any pair of signifiers, and thus endow them with different meanings, are called binary oppositions. From this, it was then not hard to extrapolate that binary oppositions form the fundamental operations in the production and communication of meaning between humans. From language, this method of studying signs and sign systems came to be applied in various fields and disciplines, including literature, mythology, anthropology, art and architecture. The study of signs and sign systems came to be referred to as Semiology (from ‘semiotics’ meaning ‘study of signs’). Now that you have seen the significance of Structuralism in linguistics, let us turn to literature and see the how Structuralism developed into a literary theory.

4.3.1.3 Structuralism as Literary Theory

In literature, the implications of the structuralist approach were far reaching. Saussure’s emphasis on relationships rather than essences had pointed to the significance of looking for meanings in terms of the former. Firstly, it was soon realized that a text’s meanings could not be created except in relation to other texts and conventions of reading. A reader brings with her/himself layers of past reading experiences which will come into play; similarly, writers and poets are influenced by works that they have read and these will be reflected in, and become part of the meanings of their own works. A literary text may refer to another work (inter-textuality), or to conventions of reading from another time or culture. All of these relationships between the text and meanings outside the text will determine the various meanings made available by the text. By taking on these types of activities, structuralist theorists like Jonathan Culler were able to de-center both the text and the human subject in the process of meaning creation. Meaning was neither entirely inside the text (no longer an organic, autonomous whole), nor was it entirely created by the human reader who could not be
the sole originator of a poem's meaning. The primary task of the structuralist critic was to make explicit the underlying 'system' which makes meaning and interpretation possible. The goal of structuralist theory was to uncover meanings by drawing attention to the system of conventions used for the creation of meanings. The 'literary competence' that the New Critics had referred to was now no longer just a question of attending a prestigious school and being well-trained in literary methods, but also being trained in assimilated systems of conventions. Obviously, since no one could possibly be trained in all such systems, the ideal reader was more of a theoretical construct used to prove a point, rather than a real person lounging in an armchair and deriving maximum pleasure from a book because she was better prepared than her neighbours to do so.

While conventions enable the reader to invent meaning, they simultaneously place limits on meaning. Moreover, old conventions are bound to be replaced by new ones. Within this larger structure of conventions, the human being could fabricate meaning as long as the conventions were recognized and used in appropriate ways. In France, structuralist theorists like Roland Barthes successfully worked on revealing the basic relativity of thought and meaning, an idea originally introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure in his study of language, as you have seen above. This relativity of meaning becomes the touchstone of structuralist theory. Because structuralism focuses so much on conventions or codes by which humans are able to uncover meanings, it tends towards becoming a sort of master code itself, relying heavily on scientific rigour and abstraction. It is a highly analytical discourse which attempts to demystify literature by showing that everything in a text is based on a structure, and therefore, constructed. This impulse towards scientific rigour was perhaps propelled by a general feeling of competitiveness between literature and other disciplines (in the age of industrialism, poetry had come to be seen as an aesthetic pastime of not much real value when compared to the sciences). Structuralists, in their ardent desire to redeem literature's privileged status, went out of their way to prove the scientific basis and analytical precision that went into meaning creation. This led to Structuralist theory being associated with esoteric systems as the systems themselves became the new subject. By establishing the primacy of systems, structuralism tended towards becoming a meta-language (a discourse about another discourse), and structuralist theorists came to form a scientific elite of their own.

Because of this over-dependence on systems of rules, rather than on the human subject (who is decentered by structuralism), the theory has been criticized as being anti-humanist - meaning does not originate in the human being, but rather is created through systems of shared conventions. Structuralism's limitations are also noted by those critics who observe that the theory assumes an ideal reader who is free of social, cultural, and class
values, neither male nor female. That the idea of literary competence may depend on culture, gender, race, ideology, or other factors, seems to be ignored by Structuralism. If the New Critics, coming in the aftermath of the wars, economic depression and loss of faith in religion, tried to look for spiritual joy in poetry, the structuralists attempted to find their religion in scientific methods and abstractions. In the next section, we will see how these criticisms led to the move away from Structuralism and towards Post Structuralism.

**Check Your Progress 1:**

Try to explain, in your own words, the arbitrary links between signifieds and signifiers as proposed by Saussure. What is the relevance of his theory of structuralism in the context of literature?

### 4.3.1 Post Structuralism and Deconstruction

#### 4.3.2.1 Roland Barthes: From Structuralism to Post Structuralism

The limitations and criticisms of Structuralism as noted above, soon gave way to a general dissatisfaction with the methods employed by structuralist theorists. The work of one such French theorist, Roland Barthes reflects this gradual shift from the over-dependence on systems and rules towards a much more playful and pleasureful attitude in literary criticism. Barthes, who started out as a structuralist theorist himself in his early career (with the publication of *S/Z* in 1970), soon drifted away towards a more aesthetic discourse which leans heavily on notions of subversive pleasure and eroticism derived from language and literature (*Writing Degree Zero*, 1972; *Pleasure of the Text*, 1973). In his work *Le Plaisir du Texte* (*Pleasure of the Text*), Barthes distinguishes between what he calls ‘readerly’ and ‘writerly texts.’ While a ‘readerly’ text poses as one which is replete with meanings and makes no demand on the reader but to consume these pre-determined meanings, a ‘writerly’ text invites readers not just to be consumers, but to be producers of the text, by ‘writing’ meaning as they read (Barthes, 1973, p. 6-7). Modern texts, in particular, Barthes declared, were more ‘writerly’ in nature as they deliberately opened themselves up to incision, participation and pleasure in the process of meaning-making. Further, Barthes distinguishes between the pleasure which we derive from the anecdotal level of a text, and that other pleasure or bliss (*‘jouissance’*), which is availed in the
interstices of writerly texts. (Barthes, 1973, p. 14-19) For Roland Barthes, therefore, the text is like a tissue of signifiers into which both writer and reader weave their meanings. The writer is not behind the text, but in its midst, and desire is born out of the mingling of the writer’s and reader’s pleasures. (Barthes, 1973, p. 64) By thus emphasizing the role of the signifier in creating the pleasure of reading and writing, Barthes shifted attention away from the realm of overarching meanings - whether in the form of truth, morality or ideology.

In the next section we will look at how some of these ideas introduced by Roland Barthes influenced other Post Structuralists. More specifically, we will examine the main ideas of one of the most well-known of these philosophers and theorists, Jacques Derrida.

### 4.3.1.2 Jacques Derrida: Deconstruction

If Saussure had shown that meaning is the result of differences between any two opposing minimal units of sounds, or phonemes (binary oppositions), poststructuralists went a step further to expand this idea. Drawing inspiration from Saussurian structuralist linguistics, they showed that meaning is not just the result of a difference between two binary oppositions but rather the result of an endless play of signifiers. For example, the signifier ‘groan’ differs from ‘moan’ because of one phonemic difference between the two. But we recognize the meaning of ‘groan’ not only because of this singular difference, but because it is also different from many other similar signifiers such as ‘tone,’ ‘phone,’ ‘hone,’ ‘bone,’ ‘cone,’ and ‘zone.’ Further, if we were to look up the meaning of ‘groan’ in a dictionary, we will get a series of new signifiers, (such as ‘a complaining sound’), but the precise meaning of the signifier ‘groan’ will not be fully present in any of these new signifiers. We could then look up the meaning of all subsequent signifiers (such as ‘complaining’ and ‘sound’) but we would be continuously led to other signifiers whose meanings are never fully ‘present’ in the signifier. This very simple observation led poststructuralists to conclude that:

- Meaning is the result of an infinite series of differences;
- Meaning is never fully present in a sign; and
- Meaning is perpetually deferred.

The infinite play of differences, which leads to the postponement or deferral of meaning, and causes meaning to never be fully present, was termed “différance” (difference + deferral, and spelt with an ‘a’ as opposed to “différence” which means ‘difference’) by Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher, literary theorist and the exponent of most of the ideas mentioned above. (Derrida, 1968, “La Différance”)
In literary discourse, poststructuralist theory showed that because of ‘*différance*,’ meanings can only be based on a plurality of interpretations, all of which are subjective. While poststructuralists were not keen on denying the legitimacy of any one interpretation, their objective was to show that any interpretation is just that – subjective, incomplete and to some extent, arbitrary. In so doing they were thus able to liberate the text from any one dominating idea or truth (master discourse). Instead, the tendency was to show various interpretations as equally valid, leading to pleasure in play, subjectivity, and plurality of interpretations.

These ideas were then also applied to the study of cultural, anthropological and philosophical texts to show that meaning is always in some sense, absent, and that the stable ‘truth’ proposed by such texts can be shown to be resting on slippery ground (meaning slips from one signifier to another and all we get are brief, glimmerings of meaning but never complete or stable truths). Jacques Derrida coined the term “deconstruction” to refer to the literary operation of locating the hidden binary oppositions within any text, undermining the apparent meaning of a text through the dismantling of these binary oppositions, and exposing the temporary, relative, arbitrary and impermanent nature of the supposed ‘true meanings’ of the text. Because of the relative nature of meaning, we can never be entirely certain of the stable truth, or ‘essence’ of any text. This radical observation, as you may have noted by now, struck a lethal blow to the very idea of the elevated position accorded to canonical books, traditional philosophies, social systems or religions. In continuation of the work of Structuralist philosophers like Roland Barthes, the “metaphysics of presence” is thus interrogated by Derrida and exposed as being based not on absolute truths, but rather on constructed meanings. If no permanent, transcendental truth is possible, it was asked, can we then continue to hold in high esteem any truth or idea?

Moreover, Jacques Derrida was interested in showing how the very basic concept of binary oppositions, as used in linguistics, is itself not an innocent idea. In any text, knowledge system or traditional philosophy, truths are based on unequal binary oppositions. That is to say that while one meaning is centered and privileged, its opposite meaning is marginalized and devalued. For instance, the signifier ‘first world’ gains its meaning and privilege in our combined cultural consciousness because of its difference from the signifier ‘third world.’ Similarly, ‘light’ is opposed to ‘dark,’ ‘day’ to ‘night,’ ‘north,’ to ‘south,’ ‘God’ to ‘devil,’ and ‘man’ to ‘woman.’ You would have noticed, as did Derrida, that in all of these binary oppositions, one term is usually privileged over the other, or that one term is seen as the positive side of its negative. The meaning of the positive, however, is derived only because an opposite, or negative side, exists. Binary oppositions are therefore hierarchized where one meaning or ‘truth’ is privileged over another. The
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deconstructionists showed, however, that there is nothing natural about these hierarchical arrangements, and that they are arbitrary. The reason for the unequal positions accorded to opposing concepts in culture is rather linked to power hierarchies in culture which get reflected in meanings which pose as ultimate truths. That which is privileged comes to occupy a position of ‘hegemony’ over its ‘other,’ but also derives its meaning from its difference from the other. The privileged meaning is centered while its opposite, or ‘other’ is pushed to the margins (see, especially, Derrida, 1978, “Structure, Sign and Play”). Privileged truths come to occupy positions of ‘transcendental signifiers’ whose authority is sustained because of concealed and unequal power relationships. Derrida revealed that western discourse is based on the transcendental truths of some signifiers, such as ‘God’ or ‘author,’ or ‘man’, and is therefore ‘logocentric’ (centered on privileged words; logos = word). These words are privileged because culture and history have arbitrarily accorded them their privileges, and thus include signifiers like ‘man,’ ‘west’ and ‘phallus.’ Derrida exposed much of western literary, philosophical and cultural discourse to be based on such logocentric and phallocentric (privileging of the phallus as the transcendental signifier) tendencies. In exposing the inter-play of binary oppositions, Derrida was able to expose the presumed authority of dominant ideas and ideologies in the western tradition.

Jacques Derrida thus brought about trenchant critiques of entire philosophical traditions, and cultural systems based on the critical philosophy of deconstruction. As you may have surmised by now, such a lethal blow did not go unopposed. Critics of deconstruction were quick to point out that the operation and theoretical perspectives embraced by deconstruction might easily lead to a complete dissolution of all meaning, leading to possible chaos and lack of faith in any ideology. If we can undermine and deconstruct all meaning, does not this lead to an infinite and bottomless journey without end and without any meaning whatsoever? Such fears were moreover sustained by the work of the Anglo-American group of deconstructionists, which included Harold Bloom, J. Hillis Miller and Paul de Man. The work of these theorists tended towards pushing post structuralist assumptions to their extreme limits, whereby all meaning was exposed as unstable, and arbitrary, fueling fears of anarchy, nihilism and despair.

However, in defence of deconstructionists, especially those in France, the work of theorists like Jacques Derrida tended to be more of a political practice aimed at undermining and exposing the undue authority and power of certain ideologies and groups. Derrida’s aim was not to reduce the text to nothing, but rather to show that the meanings pushed to the margins of a text (or system) had the capacity of undermining and overthrowing the hegemonic forces placed at the centre. As you may already have noticed from the above, deconstructive moves would hold a particular attraction.
for those interested in achieving feminist goals. Let us now turn to the relationships between deconstruction and feminism to examine the proximity between them, and the nature of these relationships.

**Check Your Progress 2:**

*Taking the example of any novel you have read or movie you have recently seen, try to describe the dominant meanings of the plot. Then deconstruct these meanings by looking for supplementary ideas that may be concealed at the margins and that may end up undermining the dominant themes.*

### 4.4 DECONSTRUCTION AND FEMINISM

#### 4.4.1 Alignments

In several blocks and units of the course material you have already read in the first two courses, you have come across various feminist theories, praxes, socio-cultural objectives, and literary-cultural representations and ideologies. From all of the above, you may have summarized that one common agenda or goal of feminist theorists, critics and activists is to work towards a more equitable distribution of social status, cultural representations, economic wealth, and material resources between women and men. You have also read about feminist theories from the point of view of literature, psychoanalysis and postcolonialism in previous units, especially in the course MWG 001.

In literary and cultural discourse, feminist theorists and literary critics in the twentieth century worked towards revealing the marginalized voices of women writers in literary history, the marginalization of female characters and viewpoints, and the possibilities of alternate styles of reading, writing and criticism from gendered perspectives. You have read about some of these in the first three units of this block. As may be evident from your readings, one way of doing this was to perform a critique of patriarchal perspectives and ideologies as reflected in texts, authors’ positions, and reading and interpretation methods. Such critiques often ended up divulging the arbitrariness with which patriarchal and male-centered perspectives became central and dominating motifs in literature, advertently or unwittingly.
pushing the concerns and perspectives of women, and non-normative
gendered identities to the margins. The desire to undo the damage done
over the centuries to women’s and non-normative viewpoints in the world
of literature and culture was to find a natural ally in deconstructive
methodologies, with which feminist perspectives had much in common.
Deconstructive strategies provided some valuable tools for the feminist
critique of hierarchical privileges and the dismantling of gendered binary
oppositions which more than often ended up devaluing non patriarchal and
non heterosexual positions and ways of thinking.

In his essay, “Discourse of Others,” Craig Owens undertakes a particular
incisive study of the relation between postmodernism (especially
deconstruction) and feminism (Owens, 1998). Briefly, we may summarise
the following issues highlighted by deconstruction which became particularly
useful as strategic tools for feminist theorists:

- Loss of mastery of one dominant perspective and acknowledgement of
  plural perspectives;
- Undermining of the authority of the knowing (privileged male) subject
  by those at the margins;
- Exposing the tyranny of the law of the signifier by showing how it
  permits only certain representations while blocking others;
- Undermining and exposing logocentric and phallocentric discourses where
  the ‘other’ (woman) is spoken for, but does not speak or represent
  herself;
- Encouraging a critique of hegemonic systems, especially patriarchy;
- De-centering the unitary, masculine subject and enabling voices at the
  margins to make themselves heard.

**Check Your Progress 3:**

*Using the above bulleted points try to think of one example for each
point in the context of a book or a film that you are familiar with,
showing how a feminist perspective may have been used to achieve
the desired result.*
While the above aspects can be gainfully used in the reading and critique of literary texts, Owens’ essay also shows how deconstructive strategies became equally important in the interpretation of works of visual art, especially photography. For instance, Martha Rosler and Cindy Sherman, two American postmodern photographers draw attention to a deliberate loss of mastery through the use of techniques which make the spectator critically aware of his or her gaze. Similarly, Barbara Kruger’s images and collages emphasize the controlled objectivity with which we normally look at images and asks us to question our presumed objectivity.

Source: Google images

Kruger’s images, as in the above photograph, often reflect the spectator’s gaze back and away from the image. In this especially evocative image of a black and white profile of a little girl, the large letters saying “no” in red are placed in contrast to the image, and confront the male gaze with their decisive dissent. The mocking sign of the child, further adds to denial of a certain type of gaze, which the spectator immediately becomes aware of. Kruger’s images deny domination by the viewer, bring into focus any concealed elements of voyeurism in the gaze, and force self-reflection.
In the next section, we will see how the element of mastery and domination, called into question by deconstruction, is employed to advantage by some postmodern feminist theorists.

**French Feminism and Deconstruction**

In France, among the most famous proponents of post-structuralist literary perspectives are the French feminists Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. You have already been introduced to their work in the unit on “Humanities” in the course MWG 001, and will be reading much more in detail about their work in the course MWG 004, in the unit on feminist psychoanalysis. Cixous, especially, worked closely with Jacques Derrida in practicing and developing strategies of writing which openly challenge conventional patriarchal and heteronormative patterns of writing. She employs deconstructive techniques to create a new kind of writing which has close associations with the female body (“écrire le corps” or “writing the body”). Deconstruction thus helps her not only to unveil the concealed phallocentric desires and power play in traditional literary texts, but also to move beyond such writing to create a liberatory space for women’s voices and bodies. Cixous’ uses densely textured language and her texts tend to move away from the traditional teleological plots by exploring plural meanings. The characters, even though fictional, are often nameless and the stories told through them move backwards and forwards, inviting the reader to enter the text through multiple pathways. Cixous also draws attention to the richness of signifiers with a language replete with word-play and a sensuality reminiscent of bodily metaphors. In thus critiquing logocentric and phallocentric discourses with their dependence on unilateral master narratives, Cixous employs deconstructive strategies to open up plural spaces from where women can voice themselves and be heard.

Similarly, Luce Irigaray employs the metaphor of the “two lips” in an attempt to undo the binary logic of phallocentric discourse, and to explore a discourse through which femininity can be explored at the level of language. You have been introduced to French writers, Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva in earlier units in MWG 001, and we will learn more about their techniques in MWG 004. Their attempts to experiment with and create a “feminine discourse” while employing deconstructive strategies have invited both interest and criticism. Critics of French feminist discourse have pointed to an inherent danger in the endeavour of positing “femininity” as some kind of definable essence, as they fear that this will automatically lead to fixed stereotypes, a trap from which women have been struggling hard to escape for centuries. Thus, while deconstruction itself denies essence, by showing how all essences can be effectively undermined, it is paradoxical to note that feminine discourses inspired by deconstructive strategies may end up creating a discourse which itself risks becoming essentialised and fixed. We will look more closely at this conundrum through the work of American
feminist theorists later on in the section on ‘Divergences’. Let us now turn our attention to African-American and Postcolonial feminists and see to what extent they have been influenced by deconstruction.

**African-American & Postcolonial Feminists**

Besides interrogating the unequal differences based on gender and sexuality, deconstructionists equally called into question hierarchies of race, class, ethnicity and sexuality based on which hegemonic positions were adopted by white, upper class male viewpoints. In the unit on Postcolonialism in MWG 001, you read about African American feminists like bell hooks and their work on bringing the plight of those at the margins into focus. You were also introduced to the ideas of third world feminist critics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who combines deconstructive strategies with a feminist Marxist perspective to speak about the subaltern.

In her widely read essay “Postmodern Blackness,” bell hooks points to an inherent irony in postmodern discourse, which, while attempting to draw attention to those at the margins, fails to have any concrete effect due to its specialized theoretical language and lack of knowledge about the real, lived experiences of those at the margins: “It is sadly ironic that the contemporary discourse which talks the most about heterogeneity, the decentered subject, declaring breakthroughs that allow recognition of otherness, still directs its critical voice primarily to a specialized audience, one that shares a common language rooted in the very master narratives it claims to challenge. If radical postmodernist thinking is to have a transformative impact then a critical break with the notion of “authority” as “mastery over” must not simply be a rhetorical device, it must be reflected in habits of being, including styles of writing as well as chosen subject matter” (hooks, 1990). Thus, while recognizing the potential benefits and good intents of deconstruction as theory, African American feminists are quick to point out the amount of work that still needs to be done in terms of more concrete, substantial and effective representations of those marginalized by race or class. The concern of black feminists in this regard can be compared to the stand taken by certain postcolonial feminists doing similar work.

One such postcolonial theorist who is well-known not only for her brilliant translations of some of Derrida’s works from French to English, but also for her theorizing from the dual locations of western deconstruction and postcolonial theory is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Among her many publications, Spivak has also written about the work of Bengali fiction writer and activist, Mahasweta Devi. Through her translations and expositions of the work of Mahasweta Devi, Spivak draws attention to the concerns of the doubly colonized tribal Indian woman. Such a woman, occupying the position of the ‘subaltern’ (a term you have already come across in the unit
on “Postcolonialism”), is shown to be effectively marginalized into silence. Through deconstructive strategies, Spivak shows how we can begin to realize and understand the situation of those at the extreme margins of oppressive cultures. In her book *The Postcolonial Critic*, Spivak draws together these two discourses, namely, deconstruction and postcolonial feminism to inquire more closely into their alignments and divergences (Spivak, 1990).

Among other Indian feminists, Uma Narayan in her book *De-Centering the Centre*, opens up a discussion between contemporary western cultural criticism and postcolonialism (Narayan, 2000). While discussing the similarities between “gender essentialism” and “cultural essentialism,” Narayan warns us against the essentialist constructions of third world cultures and representations of third world femininity in contemporary discourses, which otherwise are sympathetic to concerns of “other” cultures and women. She promotes rather, a view taken by other anti-essentialist feminists which might pay attention to differences while avoiding the dangers of essentialising such differences.

As you can see, deconstruction has influenced not only literary theory but discourses emanating from cultural studies as well, which in turn has elicited responses from postcolonial and third world feminists, many of whom are critically aware of some of the inherent dangers of employing a generalized and benevolent discourse that reifies non-western women without adequately attending to their differences. In the next section, let us examine the reservations of various groups of feminists in this regard.

### 4.4.2 Divergences

Although deconstruction and feminism seem natural allies at first glance, this is true only up to a certain point. The divergences between the two are based mainly on the specific nature and agendas of the two. Firstly, we have to remember that while feminism is a movement upheld by certain theoretical and ideological positions, deconstruction is a methodology or operation which undercuts all ideological positions by showing all of them as equally subjective. Secondly, in this very difference lies a basic contradiction beyond which feminism and deconstruction must part ways. If we were to follow the deconstructive path to its logical consequences, as done by the group of Anglo-American deconstructionists, we would end up in announcing the death of all meaning after following some of the infinite pathways of meaning dispersal and deferral. Since all ideologies and theories are by nature forms of ‘master-discourses’, in other words, discourses which tend to present themselves as upholding some kind of truth, then deconstruction must also, by its very nature, reject all ideologies. Feminism, as movement and theory, would then also have to be perceived as a set of ideological principles. Seen from this perspective, deconstruction would have no choice but to deconstruct feminist agendas and show them to be based on essentialist positions!
Since deconstruction sets itself up to dismantle essences by revealing their relativity and structuration, deconstructive feminism finds itself in the somewhat awkward position of defending its own ideological position while contradicting ideologies as a whole.

Is there then a way around this conundrum? Jacques Derrida, and French feminists who adopt deconstructive strategies in their work would respond in the affirmative. It is important to note once again that the path followed by deconstructionists in France was quite different from the one taken by the Anglo-American group. While Paul de Man and others went down a slippery slope into the realm of complete free play and a journey into bottomless signifiers, in France, deconstruction was employed as much more of a political tool by the left to question and challenge oppressive and hegemonic powers established at the centre. Following the lead of French deconstructionists, feminists in Europe strategically employed deconstruction as a tool to dismantle oppressive patriarchal forces. Deconstruction, used in this way, is not a journey into oblivion but becomes rather a political intervention based very much in real, material concerns of women and other marginalized groups. It seeks not to undo all meaning but, by showing the arbitrariness of transcendental positions, it indicates that a better, more equitable way of life is possible in which plural perspectives may co-habit together.

Postmodern feminists like Linda Nicholson, Nancy Fraser and Jane Flax have all in their own ways contributed to an ongoing dialogue between feminism, postmodernism and deconstruction. Linda Nicholson’s anthology on Feminism/Postmodernism, (1989) brings together the work of several feminist theorists like Seyla Benhabib, Susan Bordo, Judith Butler, Jane Flax, Nancy Fraser, Donna Haraway, and Sandra Harding, all of whom have contributed to the debate about the potential benefits of postmodernism from a feminist perspective. Feminist theorists have been especially interested in studying the essentialism conundrum, as described in the sections above, and in attempting to find possible resolutions to this conundrum. In The Essential Difference, an anthology edited by Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed (1994), several feminist theorists, including Diana Fuss, Teresa De Lauretis and Gayatri Spivak examine this problem from various different angles. In the next section, we will look at potential re-alignments between deconstruction and feminism, through the work of some of these theorists.

4.4.3 Re-Alignments

Through her work on marginalization and the postcolonial woman, Gayatri Spivak offers one way out of the conundrum of an anti-essentialist deconstruction and what appears to be an essentialist position from which women must speak. Using the example of the subaltern woman (“Can the subaltern speak?”), Spivak observes that the problem of the marginalized
is that they need to speak from their position of marginalization in order to draw attention to their condition. But adopting any kind of permanent position runs the risk of essentialism, something the deconstructionists would be most wary of, as you would have noted above. Feminism in general is an ideology based on gender, which seems an essentialist position because it is inextricable from biology. If women are to speak about their (oppressive) situations as women, they must speak from their position as women. But to do so immediately implies speaking from an essentialist position (a stable and permanent claim to the truth of women’s experiences rooted in their gender). In order to move beyond this essentialist trap, Gayatri Spivak proposes the use of a “strategic essentialism” (the original Greek word for which is “catachresis”). (Spivak, 1994, p. 155) What this implies is that while the subaltern woman is located at the margins, she must use that position to define her temporary essence so that she can make use of a political discourse to articulate her struggle. However, Spivak points out the temporal nature of any such position so that we do not risk freezing strategic essences into any kind of permanent essence. Deconstruction, in this way, may enable the marginalized woman to adopt a temporary essence, a podium from which it is possible to speak and be heard, within the larger feminist struggle towards equality.

In the same anthology, Diana Fuss, in her essay “Reading like a Feminist” attempts to do this by using Locke’s distinction between “real essences” and “nominal essences” (Fuss in Schor, 1994, p. 101). Nominal essences, which point to a position occupied by women rather than any real essence of women, according to Fuss, may be especially useful for anti-essentialist feminists, “who want to hold onto the notion of women as a group without submitting to the idea that it is ‘nature’ which categorizes them as such.” (Fuss in Schor, 1994, p. 100). Fuss concludes by emphasizing that for feminists, it is critical to hold onto the political element of women as a class, and that politics is the only essence which feminism cannot do without.

The above examples would have helped to show you that despite the obvious divergences between deconstruction and feminism, feminist theorists remain committed to those positive deconstructive strategies which will ultimately help further the political cause of women as a group. As aptly summed up by Diana Fuss, “To the extent that it is difficult to imagine a non-political feminism, politics emerges as feminism’s essence.” (Fuss, in Schor, 1994, p. 112)

4.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have learnt about the place of deconstruction as a method within the larger context of literary movements, especially structuralism and post-structuralism. We have examined the origins of deconstruction, the principle theoretical assumptions on which it is based, and its efforts
at dismantling overriding master discourses which oppress those who find themselves at the margins of history, culture and literature. We have then proceeded to outline the commonalities between deconstructive practice and feminist goals and agendas. We have seen how feminist theorists and critics in different parts of the world have been able to employ deconstructive strategies to further the cause of feminism. Despite certain obvious limitations and inherent contradictions, we have found that by and large the alliance between feminism and deconstruction has remained a strong and sustainable one. This conclusion should also push us to reflect on the fact that before we too hurriedly dismiss deconstruction and post-structuralism as western theoretical perspectives with little relevance for women in India, we need to carefully examine the extent to which deconstruction can be a helpful tool in Indian women’s struggle for both symbolic representation and real equality.

4.6 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1. Explain the origins of deconstruction by locating it in the context of literary movements of the twentieth century.


3. Discuss some of the ways in which feminist critics could align itself with deconstruction and use deconstructive strategies to further their agendas.

4. Explain what you think are the limitations of deconstruction. Discuss these specifically in relation to feminism. Do you think these limitations hamper the cause of feminism? Why or why not?

5. To what extent do you think is deconstruction a useful praxis for the feminist movement in India? Explain with the help of your own examples based on the lives and experiences of Indian women.

4.7 REFERENCES


4.8 SUGGESTED READINGS


