4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the earlier units, you have critically engaged with the historical and epistemological developments of Feminism. Additionally, you have related it to aspects of language, literature, culture, simultaneously studying how Feminism conversed with other theories. Other than learning to critique texts from a Feminist perspective, you have also studied what approaches contributed to this critical capacity of Feminism. Briefly, you may have noticed how Feminism has been a multi-branched movement and how different movements - geographically and historically, have contributed to it.

It is indeed through a composite reading that we can understand it - in its plurality, as ‘Feminism(s)’. This unit will bring together several of these aforementioned strands into the contemporary context and substantiate this plurality for you through multiple contexts, usages, and efficacies. We will begin with an overview of the ways in which contemporary literary and cultural theories may be used for feminist research. The relevance of each of these practices will be discussed simultaneously. We will also discuss critiques of such theories, wherever applicable, from the perspective of feminist research.
4.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

• Discuss the relationship of several contemporary theories to language, literature and culture;
• Determine the use of a certain contemporary theory for a specific purpose;
• Understand the relationship between theory, movement, and research;
• Describe the exchange between contemporary theories and Feminist Research;
• Cite specific instances of these in the Indian context; and
• Obtain a comprehensive view of the inter-disciplinary approach to research in the global scenario.

4.3 UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEMPORARY THEORETICAL LANDSCAPE

To understand the web of relationships between different theories of contemporary times, it is necessary to have a concise understanding of each of them. While they may seem unrelated on a cursory glance, these different strands of theoretical advancements have been happening in the wake of each other. In fact, several of them have led to the emergence of new disciplines within the academic universe. As you have seen with Structuralism, a development in the discipline of Linguistics or Anthropology may later inform literature and literary theory. Similarly, these disciplines are interactive, and have significantly shaped Feminist research and practice as well. Some of these theories are Post-structuralism (as a response to Structuralism) and Post-modernism (as a response to Modernism), Post-colonialism, Culture Studies (leading to disciplines like Film Studies, Theatre and Performance Studies, Digital and New Media Studies, etc.) and Queer Theory among others. Let us begin by defining and historically situating each of these theoretical developments. Alongside each, we will place instances from Feminist Research and thus see how the developments have been related to each other.

4.3.1 Contemporary Theories and Feminism

In this section, we will begin our study of some major contemporary theories, namely, Post-structuralism and Post-modernism, Post-colonialism and theories related to cultural studies, which you have already been introduced to in earlier courses. Let us read about each of them in detail.
4.3.1 Post-structuralism and Post-modernism

In the Block ‘Theories and Concepts’ in MWG 001, you have already studied Post-structuralism as well as Post-modernism. We will refer to terms from these theories. While this chapter will not explain them to you, each term, when used, will be briefly explained in brackets.

The reason we are looking at Post-structuralism and Post-modernism in conjunction is because both form a crucial core to the body of work called Contemporary Critical Theory. Importantly, both of them share the conviction that artists and intellectuals need to focus on representation (to be understood as re-presentation, not an actual thing but always a reading of the supposed thing), instead of looking for reality (the apriori, stable centre or truth) in language or text. The reason they do so is because they posit that there is no such thing as reality, and it can only be accessed through representation. In other words, if language is the sole medium through which we can understand reality, then language can never give us full, unmediated access to a reality that dwells outside it. Every understanding of reality will always already be a representation. This can be explained as a fore-grounding of subjectivity, because the author/artist/intended audience are all subjects who determine and make meaning from that representation. Furthermore, we have already discussed how the tool for such a representation is language. Language, as demonstrated by the theoretical paradigm of Structuralism and responses to it, is relational and contextual (Derrida’s concept of difference is being employed here. You have read about it in MWG 003). Since both subjectivity and representation can be seen as the cornerstones of knowledge and meaning, all acts of representing become political acts.

This is particularly evocative of the feminist slogan ‘Personal is Political’ popularised by Caron Hanisch’s essay of the same title. At the very outset in the essay (Hanisch, 1970), she points out how the word ‘therapy’ when applied to the analytical group sessions with women is a misnomer because therapy presumes a sickness, as well as a weakness that needs to be cured. Hanisch observes how these sessions reveal that what are understood as personal problems are actually political, ideological problems. She acknowledges that women go through these sessions and recognise this, which is in itself therapeutic. But looking back, it has altered the meaning of ‘therapy’ completely, because the sickness whose cure they are seeking is an unequal, hierarchical system of physical, material, social and intellectual relations, viz. Patriarchy. It is evident how in this simple as well as sharp, concise as well as convincing analysis, Hanisch uses a methodological tool from the tool-box of Post-structuralism.
It is also important to note that Carol Hanisch was one of the founding members of the group **Redstockings** (about which you have already read in MWG 001, Block 1, Unit 2). The name of this group, active in the 1970s in social and political feminist action in the US, is again an interesting indicator. It is a neologism (a word gaining popular usage, but not formally part of mainstream language) as well as a portmanteau (a word coined by joining the sound and/or meaning of two existing words). Now, this itself is a pointer towards the playfulness of language that allows more flexibility and mobility of representation, something that women had been seeking from language. Additionally, **Redstockings was a mixture of Bluestockings** (a pejorative term from the 18th Century for intellectual women) and **Red** (the political association with Radical Left). It hints, therefore, at an upturning of the pejorative ‘meaning’ of a word, and the evocation and appropriation of a legacy of free-thinking women; as well as associates its cause with that of the radical Marxist cause, yet another example of how Feminist work (activism as well as research) has progressed hand-in-hand with other theories.

We have noticed that both Post-structuralism and Post-modernism offer a critique of Positivism and offer new ways to theorize and study contemporary society. This similarity or agreement forms the tenet of both theories. While Post-structuralism is interested in knowledge and language, Post-modernism studies the much wider spectrum of history, society, culture and arts. Roughly, we may distinguish Jacques Derrida and some French Feminists as post-structuralists, and intellectuals like Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard as post-modernists. As you may notice, this distinction is merely on the basis of the chosen subject of their study and not the central theoretical underpinnings of their work. This itself is an indicator that the theoretical tenets of this post-structuralist and post-modernist world could easily be applied to feminist work as well. Moreover, this is applicable both for feminist artists as well as feminist readings of art.

A major inter-connection to developments in Feminist Research come from the post-structuralist work of **Michel Foucault**. While he was reluctant to call himself a post-structuralist, his work aligns itself, and is in fact central to much of the post-structural thought. He studied the history of sexuality through the tools of discourse analysis. Having already theorized the categories of discipline and criminality (in his work *Discipline and Punish*, 1977), where he demonstrated the inherent resistance offered by individuals to be labelled different or deviant, he elaborated further in his work *History of Sexuality* (1978) how women and people of non-normative sexualities resist censure. His work has been of key importance in understanding social control as a creative, continuous process.
Most significantly, Foucault’s work enables us (and Feminists) to interrogate Power as not a unidirectional pre-given force that is applied by the dominant order on the subjugated sections of societies through various apparatuses, but as an immanent field of possibilities, where it can be discerned only through all the acts where it is exercised. This diffusion of power creates possibilities for Feminist research because it allows a reading of previously straight-forwardly repressive, patriarchal texts also as texts of expression.

To give an unrelated instance, if there is nothing essentially male or female about a name, then adopting a male pseudonym can be seen as both a result of Patriarchy disallowing women to author texts. On the other hand, it also becomes a way in which the resisting woman appropriates that space anyway. It shows the limits of that appropriation, because she cannot do it using her own name, but also lays bare how her naming itself is a social construct. This question of the author, however, is not as unrelated to Foucault and post-structuralism as it may seem. In his essay *What is an Author?* written in 1969, Foucault explains how the author is a function. Just like a word has a meaning in its context, and meaning collects as sediments through usage over time, similarly an author is a discursive function operating as a classifying principle for the range of meanings generated by a text. A text which can otherwise have endless possibilities can be contained through the category of authorial intent.

This essay has been seen by many as a response to Roland Barthes’ essay called *Death of an Author* (1967). Barthes’ posited that in order to distance the text from a monological reading, we must separate the text from their author, and that once a text is in the public domain, readers as subjects determine for themselves, and variously so, the meanings of a text. Later, he also coined terms like lisible (readerly) and scriptible (writerly) texts, where he calls all modern (and therefore, post-modern) texts as scriptible. That is to say, the reader can write a meaning into the text as s/he reads it, instead of merely reading the meaning already present. This non-normative, anti-authoritative possibility is considered amenable to the female/ feminist reader, but at the same time, the later complication added by Foucault (as mentioned above) is also something that may contribute to the reader’s understanding of the nuances of her position.

Seyla Benhabib is an academic known best for her productive combination of critical theory and feminist theory. We can see in her work, from the mid 1980s till date, her appraisal of post-modern social theory as not a singular mechanism that looks at the world through the lens of a totalizing, unitary, dominant order, but a variety of enabling positions that examine societal orders in the world along several lines of identity affiliations, including race, class and gender. Judith Butler, whose work we will discuss later in the unit, is one of the most influential contributors in that varied
corpus of work. Post-structuralism and Post-modern social theory are pluralist in their orientation, and that is an empowering position not only for women but for all non-normative facets of the gender binary. Iris Marion Young, another feminist-philosopher, whose work is at the crossroads of feminist research and political philosophy, develops her arguments on the foundations provided by critical social theory. At the same time, her work has been influenced by French feminists like Lucie Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. She looks at various aspects of sexuality of a woman’s body, especially in contexts that are not conventionally sexual, and discusses how they contribute to an embodiment of a subject position. For instance, breasts in old age, menstruation as a punctuation marking time, etc. (Young, 2005). The concept of the body is central to contemporary Feminist research, and it has developed in conjunction with several contemporary theories. We shall discuss this again in the unit.

4.3.2 Post-colonialism

You have read in the previous Blocks about the various ways in which Post-colonial theory addresses and counters the cultural and intellectual legacies of Colonialism. In the present context, it may be seen as a response to the hegemonic discourse of Imperialism and Colonialism, left as residues in post-colonial nations. Theoretically and discursively, however, it may be studied not as moment of post- as in after colonialism, but post- as in a reply to the presence of colonialism. Hence, it can be traced even to texts, ideologies, practices of Colonial time. This teleological (teleology relates to the study of ultimate causes in nature or of actions in relation to their ends or utility) blurring is an enabling aspect that post-colonial theory derives from its association with Post-modernism, which has legitimized the existence of multiple worldviews within a given, single time-frame. Such multiple worldviews signal how multiple realities may exist, some of which may be over-represented while some under-represented, and some pushed so far out to the margins that they seem unrepresentable, or badly represented. The term that has been used to describe this last category, within post-colonial theory, is the subaltern. Some theorists, the most significant of whom is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, have engaged with the ‘subaltern’ as a concept and revealed its relevance to Feminist Theory as well. Here, we will look at the relationship between feminism and post-colonialism from a historical perspective here.

Women have been described as doubly-oppressed in several ways by many post-colonial (along with black) feminist writers, once by Patriarchy and again by Colonialism. However, as the resistance to colonialism swept the empire in the first half of the 20th century, women’s role in that resistance started becoming prominent. Especially after World War II, their presence in the public domain was as strong as was their role as equal participants
in various struggles for emancipation across various colonies. Across the world, women have been equally part of civil disobediences as well as guerilla warfares. In fact, in South Africa, both black and white women protested against Apartheid.

Consequently, the nations that were imagined and delivered in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century could not but address the cause of women. The constitution of the new nation-states recognized women as equal citizens. However, nationalist revivalist narratives also fixed women as a ‘value’, in essential roles that the feminists then had to resist. Despite women’s indomitable roles in nationalist struggles, their limited role in political and public sphere meant they had to continue to fight the enemy at home for their liberation. The language of resistance, however, was already present. The developing discourse of Post-colonialism added to it.

If we look at this through the example of India, we can perhaps understand this best. In building India as a cohesive nation, it embraced certain monolithic ways of ordering social hierarchies. As an imagined community, the nationalism of India was projected as a gender-neutral ideology, which had in the dawn of modernity, discarded certain evil practices like Sati and now saw itself emancipated of all gender-based oppressions. Instead, it sought to valorise its womenkind by placing them on pedestals of divine motherhood and such like. This was crucial for a post-colonial nation-state that was eager for locate for itself a realm of value, an original culture, a tradition to which it could claim origin. Especially in context of its multicultural secular ‘nature’, woman was the only entity that could be equitably ascribed with the monolithic burden of the nation-state. Since the female became a revered entity, it seemed logical to nationalist-cultural readings that this was beneficial to women. Is it not ironical though that even as the woman is on a pedestal (as sati, Sita, etc.), and she becomes an object of worship, she remain fixed nevertheless and finally as an ‘object’? In *Recasting Women* (1990), Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid examine how women have been cast as both symbols of traditions as well as its perpetual victims. Feminist historians like Flavia Agnes have argued how ‘Hindu’ iconography of power, viz. Shakti, when presented as the secular norm while referring to the Indian woman, may alienate the women who belong to non-hindu (or rather, non-upper-caste-hindu) minorities. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has described, in her essay *Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?*, how religion becomes an instrument of self-definition for a post-colonial nation like India, and iconography that bears a relation to that is deceptively empowering as well as politically significant. To simply discard it as propaganda, or naively adopt it as glory, are both mistakes. Feminists like Teesta Setalvad and Urvashi Butalia have taken up several strands of this inquiry through their oeuvre and demonstrated how often western feminist scholarship has sided with an analysis of culture that excludes gender in its many facets.
Given these developments in the post-colonial scenario, a position from which disagreement can be articulated, and multiplicity of gendered socio-political positions can be discussed, this is thus a sought after feminist position. It is clear that there will be no singular position but many positions from which distinct feminists could engage and represent their specific realities. Let alone woman, even the ‘Third-World Woman’ is not a unified entity, and there cannot be a unified voice speaking against gender-based oppression. It is then the task of feminist research to not be anxious and see this as a weakening of it’s consolidated stand, but embrace this plurality.

4.3.3 Cultural Studies

You are familiar with the meaning of the term ‘Feminist’ reading of a text by now. Simply put, when we engage in a feminist reading, we read a text from a feminist perspective. But, what is this text? The text can be a book, but not just a classic piece of literature. It can be pulp fiction, or even be a comic book! Even an article in the newspaper, a film or TV serial, a folk song or an advertisement, posters and pamphlets of election campaigns, and so on.

What are the developments that have contributed to this ability of doing a feminist reading of such diverse media of representation? Let us go through some of these new disciplines within the broad framework of Cultural Studies.

**Film Studies:**

Sometimes seen as a subset of Media Studies (which would include Radio, Television, Newspapers, Magazines and several forms of mass media), Film Studies, as the name suggests, concerns itself with the historical, cultural and theoretical approach to cinema.

Film Studies has several parents. In its most nascent form, it traces its lineage to Walter Benjamin’s essay *Work of Art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) and Adorno’s concept of the ‘culture industry’ (1940s). Both were associated with the Frankfurt school at different points, which came to classify culture as high culture or popular culture. Although this was a move ahead from the culture vs savage binary, it was yet another binary in which representation was embedded. Further developments in modes of cultural criticism, like Roland Barthes’s analysis of several films in his text *Mythologies* (1957) are of equal importance. Barthes studied a variety of social phenomena (of which films were also a part), and termed them modern myths. In a later edition of the book, Barthes explained in the preface how the function of myths was to transform history into nature. Read this way, films could be seen as vehicles of ideology. François Truffaut’s conception of *Auteur Theory* (positioning the director as the author of the film-text) in the 1950s (and its widespread global acceptance) was the
It is evident that like any other form of representation, films too would interest feminists as areas of research. Feminist film studies, in its first stage, explained how the camera was not an innocent tool for capturing what was out there, existing as if naturally. Instead, they show, that the camera is a perspective that is made invisible - it showcases but is not to be seen in the final product, the film. The camera is a vantage point, it represents through the film the ‘naturalised’ world of the dominant order. It creates and sustains structures of identification, desire and ambition, in which the audience becomes complicit through a dominant popular appeal. It presents the interests of one section of society as if they were universally valid interests of progress and well-being. In other words, it is yet another tool in the hands of the dominant order to service its cause. However, in today’s post-structuralist world, it must be possible to find ways in which representations cannot contain within themselves all possible audience responses.

Let us look at instances of Film Scholars reviewing aspects of Bollywood to help us further investigate the relationship between Film Studies and Feminism. Conventional films are also known as ‘masala’ (Mooij, 2006). It may refer to the film itself, or to the formula that goes into making it. Masala – a mixtures of spices – is an interesting nomenclature. It seems to suggest that they make up for the spice in the spectator’s life, in other words provide entertainment that is not present in the main dish, i.e., life. Films, so, signal towards fantasy. This seems to suggest that realism/ art-house cinema represents reality as is, whereas Masala cinema offers fanciful escape. This distinction is too simple and brazen, and doesn’t take into account the theoretical aspects mentioned in the previous paragraph. It is imperative that we study the generative matrix through which we make meaning in greater complexity than this simple binary. In fact, the very existence of this binary needs to be studied as a part of that matrix of knowledge-making.

Not only does Film Studies require us to go beyond studying the usual narrative elements of plot, theme, action as we do in textual analysis, but also look at aspects specific only to films - scenography, music, camera angles, lighting and perspective, etc. Many scholars have delineated how the songs in Indian cinema play a distinctive role. They can be seen as portions that offer relief from narrative, or that aid the narrative in directions not convenient through the prosaic format. Alternately, it can be said that the pressure of convention on the narrative is so much that it ‘breaks’ into song and dance. Now, clearly, this tells us how the narrative may be
fractured, in a positive sense, for many readings to be possible, not only
for the spectators but also for the characters.

Songs have also been studied as alluding to elements of desire woven into
the narrative that is possible only through evoking the sentiments through
operatic modes like music and dance. The most important allusion in songs
has been of sexual desire. Employing tropes like monsoon, moon, etc. leads
to a recognizable vocabulary through which desire can be spoken of. In an
already fictional unit called the film, a supra-fictional entity called the
song helps to create a space where a man and woman can express sexual
desire for each other, often outside the convention of marriage. This allusion
then is clearly a game, even a subterfuge for desire not permissible
elsewhere. Objective correlatives abound in songs, and they are highly-
coded paradigms through which we can unfurl the map of meanings a film
attempts to plot. Songs also have an after-life outside the film in the Indian
context, as while a film may not be very popular, its songs might. Conversely,
in the 1970s and 80s, it was also believed that the formula of a super-hit
film was great music. Songs are played through the radio, in cultural events,
etc. independently and often do operate as independent entities. So, a film
can actually be seen not as a unitary project but one with layered, multiple
messages, that reveal themselves not fully but occasionally, to specific
audiences, within specific environments. The category of the auteur too is
not unitary, especially in case of Indian cinema when the choreographer,
music director, star-actors all contribute to the final product in significant
ways.

This multiplicity makes it more difficult to fathom to final effect on the
spectator. Let us discuss some of those difficulties. Feminists readings of
films as cultural enterprises and songs as specific cultural artifacts can
discover these messages. Can some of these messages also be appropriated
to the feminist cause? While the body in the song may be female aimed
primarily at the male audience as an object of desire, her expression of
desire within the frame can become a mode of expression or get contained
in the meta-frame of the male-gaze. Is it safe to say that the films that
tackle social and political issues are more feminist? Not necessarily. A film
that resists stereotyping of one kind may still fall prey to the same trap of
another kind. Also, it is possible that critically aware films offer a cathartic
( purifying) paradigm that relieves narrative anxieties but doesn’t offer
‘real’ solutions. While it is easy to say that Feminist research can study
films too, the question whether films and film studies can further the
feminist project is a more complex one. Feminist Film Studies, however,
does open up an avenue of inquiry into popular modes of cultural
production and consumption.
Another pertinent example can be the love marriage vs arranged marriage paradigm as explored in Bollywood films. Through this, the family unit as a quantum of patriarchal tenets can be studied, critically engaged with or tinkered. The very establishment of this binary however, corresponds to an east-west paradigm, as elaborated by Meena Khandelwal in her essay *Arranging Love* (2009). Khandelwal shows how this exaggerated cultural difference circumambulates the perceived relation between gender and nation through popular cinematic texts. She also unearths how it is not just arranged marriage, but love marriage too, and the very notion of romantic love as expounded in popular cinema that is patriarchal in propagating heterosexual monogamous normative relationships. This is not to suggest that the opposite is necessarily liberating but to suggest the distinction between romantic love and sexual pleasure. She further builds on the political economy of love and desire. Throughout her essay, she develops an understanding that neither is arranged marriage an essentially Asian tradition, nor is romantic love a recent global import, thereby blurring the binary in effective ways. This is a good example of how film studies, a discipline that researches a rich popular cultural form, is an interesting site from which feminist research can speak its claim.

Our knowledge of the world is socially constructed. This post-structuralist understanding has influenced film studies too. Some critics have also seen these post-ideological developments as impediments in reaping the potential of popular cultural forms. Since we believe that representation is the only reality, and there is no way we can access the real, we are forever alienated by the very language we employ to express ourselves. If all knowledge is mediated, then the only critical gesture is an empty sign. This is sometimes seen as a trap by feminists, who say that the aim is not to have a feminist position on representation itself, but a position on feminist representation (Hammett, 1997). That is, some feminist research regrets the lack of feminist film-making and desires more feminist representation within the world of cinema.

*Theatre and Performance Studies* :

A contemporary theoretical field of study that investigates performance in the broadest sense, Theatre and Performance Studies bears a relationship with Feminist Research in much the same way as Film Studies. We have discussed those aspects in the preceding section. Specifically, a new discipline by itself, theatre studies is now able to study folk and oral traditions too, therefore making lots of new archival material more easily accessible for feminist research. This section will focus on showing theoretically how an inter-discipline or a post-discipline, as Performance Studies is sometimes called, can be a liberating tool for Feminist research.
Judith Butler (You have already read about Judith Butler’s work in Blocks 3 and 4 of MWG 004), in her formative work, including texts like *Undoing Gender* (2004), maps the theoretical relationship between performativity and gender roles. She highlights how gender is essentially performed. At the time of birth, every child is assigned a gender, which is a non-negotiable binary categorization. Throughout her life, the child performs the gender ascribed to her. In this, she develops further this distinction between sex and gender that Feminism has propounded. According to Butler, performing your gender to satisfaction is what ‘humanises’ us in contemporary culture, whereas inability to do is met with punitive alienation, marginalization, and mockery. At the same time, this performative gender constructs itself by hiding the point of its origin. The origin is always outside the system of representation (as Derrida said for language too!). Butler puts an elaborate framework building on what Simone de Beauvoir said, “One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman.” (*Second Sex*, 1986). It is through stylised interpretative acts of repetition that this performance gains a naturalised credibility.

Building on Butler’s hypothesis, feminists have also demonstrated how this naturalism creates a constant pressure to ‘perform’, to be up to the mark of masculinity or femininity, as well as exposed the social and political economy (from beauty pageants to wedding ceremonies, sports to perceived sexual desirability) as well as the medical infrastructure (from breast enhancement surgeries in women to breast reduction hormone therapy in men) that goes behind sustaining the ‘becoming’ of a gendered self. Sue-Ellen Case, Susan Bennett and Peggy Phelan are also important feminist and performance studies scholars.

**Digital and New Media Studies:**

Digital and New Media Studies is an emerging discipline at the intersection of globalisation’s many effects and media’s changing face in view of digital, consumer-oriented, interactive technology. Communication theorist Marshall McLuhan’s predictive conception of the ‘global village’ and ‘the medium is the message’ can be seen at the helm of New Media Studies. Participative social media practices, real time influence, relationship between voice and protest (as expressed virtually, or as expressed offline but garnering support from an audience worldwide through internet 2.0), etc. have all been revolutionary concepts that the conventional social orders have had to acknowledge and take into account. From the blue-bra becoming a symbol of democracy, and allied-resistance against brute force from the Egypt uprising to the pink chaddi campaign in India, the role of new media in radically democratic, participatory, inclusionary movements can begin to be noticed. While the discipline is at its emerging stage, it is already finding resonances with the Feminist cause and further developments can be anticipated to build more on this strength of association.
4.3.1.4 Queer Theory

Queer Theory (you learnt about some important aspects of queer theory in MWG 001, Block 6), developed as a discipline within critical theory after the coming of age of Post-structuralism. It is relatively new, gaining importance through queer readings of canonical texts as well as through theorizing the concept of queerness. It bears important affinities with Feminist Theory, both of them problematize gender as an essential given. The constructedness of desire, sex, gender, and therefore, identity is at its crux. By making the deviant, the marginal, the non-normative as the ‘centre’ of its study, queer theory opens up a radical vantage point from where occurrences and presences hitherto considered anomalies can be given legitimate space, as well as absences and gaps can be discovered, rendered visible. This is not a simple acceptance of homosexuality, but opens up a way of discovering, discussing and accepting various kinds of sexual desire and behaviour. The very use of the nomenclature ‘queer’, a term used to signify mismatch, oddity or strangeness, is telling in this regard. It is evident how a lot of this has been facilitated by the progress made by Feminist Theory. Several theorists of the field also are (or have been) Feminist theorists or writers, like Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Adrienne Rich, et al. Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai are important Indian scholars that have written extensively on the area of same-sex desire. Some have also been associated with other contemporary theoretical fields like visual studies, performance studies and film studies, including Jose Esteban Munoz, Lauren Berlant.

As can be gathered, Feminist Theory and Queer Theory have a mutually holistic relationship. This is not to suggest that feminists and queer theorists agree on everything, but that their goals have a common intersection. Their subject positions and their process may still be very varied. Identity struggles, as we have established by now, are more complex that one unified subject position, since identities are defined across various vectors - class, sex, race, religion, etc. Let us focus on a few concepts that are important instruments of both Feminist Theory and Queer Theory.

You can recall the discussion on sex-gender in MWG 002 where we saw sex and gender have typically been understood as biological fact and social construct, respectively. However, it isn’t a simple distinction. Sexuality, the interstice between the two, is determined by several traditional notions of gender. The conditions for permitting sexual activity (notice our seemingly vague use of the term activity, that may encompass any aspect of sexuality and sexual expression), the right age to engage in sexual activity, the appropriate behavior when engaging in sexual activity, etc. are all determined by the prescribed gender and cultural roles. Sex then is not a fact, but a facility that is constantly being acted upon. Donna Haraway, a feminist you
are already familiar with, has done excellent analyses of how the discourse of science works to privilege certain perspectives, and reveals how truths are partial truths within the scientific experimental method. Several scholars have worked in this direction, securely proving that normative heterosexuality is an imagined concept, and is constantly reinforced so it may appear as a fact, and not the other way round. Heterosexuality serves, as Chrys Ingraham puts it as, “the unexamined organising institution and ideology (the heterosexual imaginary) for gender” (The Heterosexual Imaginary, 1997). While gender is studied across several social institutions, its distinction from sex (as a biological identity) has limited its scope. In recent scholarship as well as developments in the public sphere, attention to marginalised sexualities has allowed the opening up of those possibilities.

This points to a new, vitalised understanding of the body as a site of power, just as it is the site for representation. Many post-structuralist feminists have substantiated this in their work, most notably Judith Butler. She explains in Undoing Gender (2004) how it is through the body that “gender and sexuality become exposed to others, implicated in social processes, inscribed by cultural norms and apprehended in their social meanings.”

Another important concept in this theorization (in fact, in studying the potential of exchange between Feminism and any other contemporary theory) is that of intersectionality. The term intersectionality refers to recognising the multiple dimensions of subject positions and subject relations. First coined by Kimberley Crenshaw in 1989, it gradually became popular within critical theory. Marie-Claire Belleau has argued for ‘strategic intersectionality’ (2007) so that feminists from different socio-cultural backgrounds are able to work together, strategically, and co-operate on issues they agree on, while not committing themselves wholly to the other’s cause. This may be extended to apply to Feminist researchers and other contemporary theorists as well where their goals and interests intersect, but are not wholly identical.

4.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have applied a lot of theories and concepts that you have acquired previously. It is no wonder that the way in which the term gender is used today was popularised in 1960s, when a lot of current contemporary theories were also burgeoning into existence. We have used some important examples of contemporary theories to mark ways in which they have influenced Feminist research and vice-versa. We have also seen instances of disagreement between proponents of certain critical theories and feminists. We have noticed the possibilities for further associations and co-operations that exist between these disciplines, also realising that the way ahead is necessarily pluralistic and interdisciplinary.
Upon further study, you will notice that several disciplines have now accommodated and are paying attention to the progress in feminist research. For instance, Translation Studies, a literary discipline, has taken into account how gender as a cultural construct must be taken into account when attempting translation, a cultural transmission through language. These inroads are testimony to the pertinence of feminist research to acknowledging and shaping knowledge processes in the contemporary world.

### 4.5 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Discuss how Post-structuralist thought has created theoretical ground for doing contemporary Feminist research. Mention limitations, if any.

2) Explain the similarities and differences between the gender struggle and the post-colonial struggle for identity and representation.

3) How has the proliferation of media in the current global age impacted feminist research? Discuss.

4) Elaborate how the inter-disciplinarity of contemporary theory impacts the understanding and the possibilities that constitute Feminist research.

5) What are some of the concepts that Queer Theory and Feminist Research have in common? Discuss.

### 4.6 REFERENCES


### 4.7 SUGGESTED READINGS


