

## UNIT 3 FEMINIST INTERVENTIONS IN THEORY

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Piyas Chakrabarti

### Structure

- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Objectives
- 3.3 Feminism: A Basic Overview
- 3.4 Trends in Feminist Literary Criticism
- 3.5 Feminist Resistance to Theory
- 3.6 New Criticism and Feminist Literary Criticism
- 3.7 Formalism and Feminist Literary Criticism
- 3.8 Reader Response Theory and Feminist Literary Criticism
- 3.9 New Historicism and Feminism
- 3.10 Structuralism and Feminist Literary Criticism
- 3.11 Poststructuralism and Feminist Literary Criticism
- 3.12 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.13 Unit End Questions
- 3.14 References
- 3.15 Suggested Readings

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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In other units like MWG 001, Block 5, Unit 2 (Feminism and Psychoanalysis), MWG 003, Block 1, Unit 4 (Feminism and Deconstruction) and MWG 007 (Reading Gender with/in Structuralism) we have already seen how feminist theories have made a significant contribution towards creating a more aware reader, capable of viewing both literary texts and society through a gendered perspective. Now we will try to see how feminist literary criticism, itself a product of “women’s movement” of the 1960s, interacts with and critiques other schools of theory such as New Criticism, Formalism, Reader Response theory, New Historicism, Structuralism and Poststructuralism.

A major debate within feminist criticism has been about the amount and kind of theory that should feature in it. The ‘Anglo-American’ feminist school has been skeptical about the efficacy of recent critical theory in helping the concerns of feminism and feminist literary criticism, while the “French” feminists have not at all been loathe to adopting and adapting a significant amount of post-structuralist and psychoanalytic theory in formulating their arguments. In this unit we will try to see the contributions made by both sides in developing feminist literary discourses.

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## 3.2 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit you will be able to:

- Describe the basic ideas of feminism;
- Discuss feminism's resistance to theory;
- Provide an overview of different schools of theory; and
- Analyse the relationship of feminist literary criticism with these schools of theory.

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## 3.3 FEMINISM: A BASIC OVERVIEW

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The 'women's movement' that was initiated in the 1960s was not the beginning of feminism. 'Feminist' ideas can be found in literary works throughout the ages, from ancient times to modern era..The roots of feminism can be traced back to ancient Greece; in the work of **Sappho** and arguably in **Aristophanes'** play *Lysistrata*. In the ancient Greek play, *Lysistrata* women come to control the treasury in the Acropolis, the female chorus is presented as the physical and intellectual better of the male chorus, and women employ their sexuality to disrupt the essentially masculine project of the Peloponnesian War. Later, during the Middle Ages, **Goeffrey Chaucer's** play *Wife of Bath*, feminist concerns can once again be discerned as the protagonist values 'experience' over authority and is clearly more than a match for each of her five husbands. There was however, a growing awareness among prominent women thinkers of the time about the necessity of women finding their own voice, becoming capable of addressing their own issues. In France, following the French Revolution, **Mary Wollstonecraft** asserted the importance of extending the ideals of Revolution and Enlightenment to women, especially through access to education. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century a large number of major female literary figures like the **Brontes**, **Jane Austen**, **George Eliot**, **Elizabeth Barrett Browning**, **Emily Dickinson** (to name a few) came to the forefront in both Europe and America to provide impetus to a growing concern with the rights of women. Their work was taken further forward by modernist women writers like **Gertrude Stein**, **Katherine Mansfield**, and **Virginia Woolf**. Thus, we can see the feminist literary criticism that developed from 1960s cannot deny the contribution of those who paved the way before them.

During this long history women had to struggle against a biased educational system and financial dependence on the male members. They had to contend against a patriarchal ideology that forced on them a culture of silence and obedience, and also struggle against a literary tradition that belittled their literary endeavours. In most cases, the representation of women in literature written by men perpetuated certain gender stereotypes that aided and

abetted the patriarchal desire for control over women's 'body' and thinking. It was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when women actively struggled for political and social rights that it became possible to see the systematic development of feminist criticism. Feminist literary criticism, itself a product of the 'women's movement' of the 1960s has been literary from the start as it realized the importance of challenging the cultural stereotypes perpetuated by literature.

The concerns of the followers of this movement were heterogeneous and varied. A few of the prominent concerns were to rewrite the history of literature while being sensitive to the literary contributions of women; to trace a female literary tradition; to explore the connection between gender and different aspects of literary forms. There is, in all these different concerns, a persistent engagement with the nature of language itself. Some feminist critics have argued that since language, as it has been used across centuries, carries within it a patriarchal bias, there is need for a new kind of female language. Others have advocated appropriation and modification of the inherited language. The patriarchal bias of language can be traced back to Aristotle who tried to create categories that separated the world into strictly distinct entities. Such demarcations, often binary in nature such as *black* and *white*, *man* and *woman*, are viewed by many modern theorists as erroneous and harmful as binary thinking consciously or unconsciously perpetuated a power structure that necessarily prioritized one half of the binary over the other. Feminists reject such divisive ways of looking at the world, and try to sensitize people about the various shades between *black* and *white*, *male* and *female*. The effort is to highlight the fact that such categories are founded on neither any essence nor on any natural distinction, but are a product of cultural and ideological constructions. Feminists, therefore, challenge and critique any 'theory' that is founded on masculine presuppositions.

One of the most important contributions of feminism has been the rejection of objectivity and neutrality. Feminists can indeed be considered the pioneers of ushering in a new kind of honesty in acknowledging that they write from subjective positions informed by specific circumstances. This position is largely a result of the feminists' acceptance that thought is not a disembodied and abstract process, but is intricately related to the nature and situation of the body in time and space. This is a direct challenge to the male Cartesian tradition which tries to present the idea that thinking occurs at a level of disembodied universality. In this unit we attempt to trace the basic ideas of some of the literary theories that developed before and since the 1960s and evaluate the nature of feminist interaction with them.

**Check Your Progress:**

i) *Where lies the root of feminism?*

ii) *What kind of bias did feminism struggle against since its early days?*

iii) *Why does feminism reject objectivity and neutrality?*

### 3.4 TRENDS IN FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM

Feminist literary criticism, although developing from the 'women's movement' of the 1960s, had a distinctly literary angle from the beginning and was therefore distinct from feminism. **Toril Moi** draws a clear distinction between 'feminist', 'female' and 'feminine'. She argues that the first is a political stance, the second a biological reality while the third is a set of culturally defined characteristics. The representation of women in literature was seen by feminists as a patriarchal means of constructing acceptable role models for women. For example, feminist critics argued that in the novels of nineteenth century women were rarely seen to be working for a living, thereby propagating the idea that the happiness of a woman lay within the domestic ambit of a happy married life.

The feminist criticism of the 1970s was majorly involved in exposing the mechanisms of patriarchy, that is, the cultural mind-set in people that allow the perpetuation of sexual inequality. In the 1980s, however, feminist criticism began to draw upon the findings of other schools of criticism. It switched its focus from challenging male versions of the world to exploring the qualities of the female world and trying to reconstruct the suppressed or lost annals of female experience. It also tried to create a canon of women's writing so that neglected women writers come to be recognized and appreciated.

**Elaine Showalter** argued that this transformation in late 1970s can be seen in the shift in attention among feminist critics from 'androtexs' (books by men) to 'gynotexs' (books by women). She used the term 'gynocritics' to refer to feminist critics who study the gynotexs. Showalter also divides the history of women's writing into three distinct phases: the *feminine phase* (1840-80, in which women writers endeavoured to emulate male aesthetic standards; the *feminist phase* (1880-1920) in which there was an effort to be radically different from male standards; and finally a *female phase* (1920 onwards) in which the focus was on female writing and experience. Since the 1970s there have been a number of ongoing debates within feminist critics, one of which being the role of theory in feminist criticism.

**Check Your Progress:**

- i) *What, according to Toril Moi, is the difference between 'feminist', 'female' and 'feminine'?*

ii) What is the difference between 'androtexts' and 'gynotexts'?

iii) What are the three phases in which Showalter divides women's writing?

Let us now read about what is understood by feminist resistance to theory.

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### 3.5 FEMINIST RESISTANCE TO THEORY

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Throughout its long history, feminism has tried to disrupt the complacent certainties of a patriarchal culture that accords a superior position to man and by extension to characteristics considered masculine. In the past, a popular idea harboured by men was that their sperm was the active seed that gave form to the passive ovum lacking in identity. **Mary Ellman** in *Thinking About Women* (1968), deconstructs such a view by arguing that it was the sperm that was conformist and sheep-like which obediently went to the confident and daring ovum.

Feminism in its various manifestations, a reason why we now study 'feminisms', attempts to free itself from naturalized patriarchal notions. This is often manifest in its refusal to be incorporated into any particular 'approach' and challenge and subvert received theoretical practices. Some feminists resist 'theory' altogether since they find the theoretical parameters

to be informed by fraudulent male and macho concerns. Freud's theories, for example, have been castigated by feminist schools and feminist literary critics for their inherent sexism.

In recent times, however, feminist literary criticism has found common concerns in the Lacanian and Derridean models of poststructuralist thinking, partly because they resist masculine notion of authority and truth (Please, see other units for more detailed discussion on this: MWG 003, Block I, Unit 4 and MWG 001, Block 5 , Unit 2, section 2.4). **Mary Eagleton**, in the introduction to her Critical Reader, *Feminist Literary Criticism* (1991) argues that feminism has always displayed a suspicion towards 'theory' which empowered the male 'impersonal' over the female 'personal' experience. The resistance towards objective, logical and impersonal mode of thinking is evident in the feminist celebration of the 'personal'. However, she also notes that since there is hardly any free position left outside theory, it is important to engage in debates with other critical theories, as indeed many feminist critics have been doing. Over the past forty years, feminist literary criticism has been innovatively challenging and changing not only other (male oriented) theories but also its own position and agenda.

**Check Your Progress:**

i) *Why does Feminist literary criticism show a distrust of theory?*

ii) *Why has feminist literary criticism found common concerns with Lacanian and Derridean models of thinking? You can substantiate your answer by reading other units from the earlier courses also.*

In the following section you will need about new criticism and its understanding within feminist literary criticism.

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### 3.6 NEW CRITICISM AND FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM

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New Criticism emerged during the early decades of the twentieth century and continued to be a dominant trend in teaching and scholarship till the early 1960s. It got its name from **John Crowe Ransom's** 1941 book *The New Criticism*, which argued that while studying literature students should focus on literature, that is the given text, rather than about literature. Books and articles like **I. A. Richards' *Practical Criticism*** (1929), **William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*** (1930), and **T. S. Eliot's 'The Function of Criticism'** (1933) laid the base for New Criticism. Their ideas were developed considerably by a group of American poets and critics like R. P. Blackmur, Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate and William K. Wimsatt.

The practitioners of New Criticism view a work of literature as a self-contained, self-referential object. New Critics tend to disregard the social context that surrounds both the text and its reader and focus instead on the relationships within the text that have its own distinctive character or form. A close scrutiny of the structure of a work becomes the means of arriving at the meaning of the text. Since New Criticism stresses close textual analysis, regarding the text as a carefully constructed object that has a formal, observable patterns, it is sometimes also called "objective" approach to the study of literature.

It needs to be remembered that although New Criticism is associated with certain principles and terms like ***affective fallacy*** (the idea that the reader's response is in keeping with the meaning of a work) and ***intentional fallacy*** (the idea that the author's intention determines the meaning of a work) - the New Critics were eventually voicing a cultural statement and not trying to create a critical dogma. This becomes clear when one takes into account that a number of key figures associated with New Criticism were also part of a group called Southern Agrarians. This was an association for conservative American Southerners who were disgusted by the increasing ugliness of contemporary life. The high point of the influence of New Criticism was during the Second World War and the Cold War succeeding it, and it would probably not be erroneous to argue that its privileging of literary texts and an impersonal analysis of qualities that make literary masterpieces provided a haven for alienated intellectuals and students. Moreover, for the large number of students in the United States who came from different parts of the world lured by the American Dream, and therefore shared no common history, New Criticism proved to be a useful literary tool. As it focused only on the words on the page, it was somewhat a historical, probably a method deemed suitable for the new democratic American experience. Whatever be the reason for its popularity, it wielded a marked influence on the



American academia during the time and went to become the preferred approach of analyzing literary texts in College and High Schools.

The rigorous textualism of the New Critics provoked a persistent anxiety among critics for whom the value of literature lay in its potential for social criticism. The feminist literary critics, along with other theoreticians and critics, who identified with the New Left or with social movements like feminism and gay liberation, were deeply disgruntled by the New Critics' attempt to deny the connections between texts and the world beyond them. **Kate Millett**, for example, in her *Sexual Politics* (1970) uses literary texts as the key source to represent arguments that went beyond the text and unravelled the mechanisms within patriarchy. The task of a feminist literary critic, unlike a New Critic, is to expose the 'sexism' that exists in varying degrees within literary texts. The act of reading and criticizing can therefore be seen as either succumbing or resisting the ideological onslaughts of the text.

***Check Your Progress:***

i) *List the basic ideas of New Criticism.*

ii) *Why do feminist literary critics object to New Criticism?*

### 3.7 FORMALISM AND FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM

Formalism as a discipline was quite similar to New Criticism. Both schools of criticism wish to explore what is specifically 'literary' in texts and favour a detailed and empirical approach to reading. However, it needs to be noted that compared to the New Critics, the Russian Formalists were much more concerned with establishing a 'method' and a 'scientific' basis for the study of literature. The approach of the New Critics was fundamentally humanistic e.g. **Cleanth Brooks** insisted that Andrew Marvell's 'Horatian Ode' was not a political statement of Marvell's attitude to Civil War but simply a demonstration of opposed ideas, unified in a poetic whole. In contrast, Russian Formalists argued that human 'content' (emotions, ideas and 'reality' in general) had no literary significance in general, but merely provided a setting for the workings of literary 'devices'. Their effort was to outline model and hypotheses (in a scientific manner) to explain the manner in which aesthetic effects are produced by literary devices, and how the 'literary' is distinguished from and related to the 'extra-literary'. While the new Critics considered literature as a form of human understanding, the Formalists thought of it as a special use of language.

The history of Russian Formalism can be divided into three phases.

- The first phase is governed by the model of the 'machine' which views literary criticism as a sort of mechanics and the text as a bundle of devices.
- In the second or 'organic' phase literary texts are viewed as fully functioning 'organisms' with interrelated parts.
- The third phase tries to see literary texts as part of a 'system' or 'products' of the entire literary system and even meta-system of interrelated literary and non-literary systems.

The same principles that had led feminist literary critics to criticize the tenets of New Criticism hold good for their criticism of Formalism. The concept of a self-contained art-work cannot be accepted by any of the schools of theory that value literature's social engagement. For the cross-disciplinary women's studies courses, literature was intricately and inextricably connected to sociology and history. Literature, when viewed from a formalistic point of view, appeared to feminist critics as not just insufficient but complicit in a conspiracy of silence on issues of sexual politics. The feminist literary criticism of the 1970s in the United States was strongly anti-formalistic and committed to the notion that literature imitated, interacted and shaped life, and it was crucial to locate and critique the power structures that it helped to nurture and perpetuate. Its very materialistic and social reality rendered it impossible to confine a text only within its literary characteristics. Moreover, according to feminist literary

critics, the formalist effort to separate the text from its context was restrictive as it denied the plurality that a number of post-structuralist schools emphasized.

***Check Your Progress:***

- i) *What are the basic ideas of Russian Formalism?*
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- ii) *What are the three phases in Russian Formalism?*
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- iii) *Why do feminist literary critics object to Formalism?*

In the following section you will read about yet another theory, Reader Response Theory and its interaction with feminist literary criticism.

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### **3.8 READER RESPONSE THEORY AND FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM**

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Reader-Response criticism encompasses various approaches to literature that focus on the relationship between the text and the reader. It emphasizes the varied ways in which a reader participates in the course of reading a text and the multiple perspectives that can be generated out of this relationship. It challenges the text-oriented theories of Formalism and the New Criticism which ignores the reader's contribution to a text. In Reader-Response Criticism the reader is taken not as merely a passive recipient of a given meaning but as an active participant in the generation of meaning.

**Stanley Fish** in *Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics* (1970) argued that a text has no real meaning until it is read. A reader completes its

meaning by reading it, and it is done by applying different codes and strategies. Since then various theories have been forwarded regarding the relation between the reader and the text. **Wolfgang Iser** in *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1976) argued that all texts have 'blanks' or 'gaps' that have to be filled by the reader during interpretation. As literature exists meaningfully only in the mind of the reader, it is easy to understand the primacy that reader-response criticism accords to the reader. However, all texts are not equally receptive for an active participation on the part of the reader. In 1979, **Umberto Eco**, in *The Role of the Reader* distinguishes between 'open' and 'closed' texts. An 'open' text like T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* requires the reader's active collaboration in the production of meaning, while a closed text like a scientific treatise or a whodunit by a mystery story writer does not require the same degree of participation from the reader for the production of meaning.

Another reader-response theory offered by David Bleich, Norman Holland and Robert Crosman, argues that the reader's response is not controlled solely by the text but also by some deep-rooted, personal, psychological needs. They view reading as some form of covert wish-fulfillment where the reader interacts with a text as with any other form of desire. **Norman Holland** in *The Nature of Literary Response: Five Readers Reading* (1975) and **David Bleich** in *Subjective Criticism* (1978) undertake a detailed analysis of reading habits and responses of individual readers. There is always a possibility that a shared set of concerns and values can control, to some extent, a reader's response to a text. Even Stanley Fish partly shifted from his earlier position when he agrees that individual reading strategies employed by readers may be partly conditioned by their shared concerns. For example, he accepts that certain interpretive groups like American college students analyzing a novel as part of their class assignment may develop some common 'interpretive strategies'. Recent reader-oriented critics, developing on Fish's idea and responding to Hans Robert Jauss's idea of 'horizons of expectations' have tried to assess the ways in which the reading public's expectations change over time

Feminist literary criticism have interacted with ideas forwarded by reader-response criticism to assess whether there is a unique way of reading as a woman. Numerous works of literary history since the 1970s have tried to assess literary responses in relation to specific readerships. An early feminist endeavour of this can be seen in Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970), Millet attacks the conventions where readers are assumed to be male, by positioning reader affronted by the violent phallicism in the works of D. H. Lawrence, Norman Mailer, Henry Miller and Jean Genet. Later feminist critics like Cora Kaplan and Toril Moi have pointed out serious flaws in some of the basic premises of *Sexual Politics*, but the fact that there was a growing awareness and necessity of approaching a text as a woman, as displayed in *Sexual Politics*, cannot be denied.

**Check Your Progress:**

i) *What is Reader-Response Theory?*

ii) *How does feminist literary criticism interact with Reader-Response Theory?*

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### **3.9 NEW HISTORICISM AND FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM**

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New Historicism, which developed during the 1980s, was largely a reaction to the text-only approach of the formalists and new critics, and also some of the schools of criticism that challenged them in the 1970s. New historicists do not disregard the importance of the text but insist on reading the text in conjunction with historical awareness. This is hardly 'new' in itself.

Its difference from the historical criticism of the 1930s and 1940s lies in the fact that it assimilates some of the ideas of the Post-Structuralist and Reader-Response theory of the 1970s. Moreover, it is influenced by feminist, cultural, and Marxist critics whose work was 'new' in the 1980s. Unlike historical critics whose work was largely driven by facts and events, the new historicists seem to doubt whether the truth about events can at all be purely or objectively comprehensible. The new historicists define the boundaries of history in a broader sense than their predecessors. They

erase the line dividing historical and literary material, emphasizing the historical nature of literary texts and the 'textual' nature of history. For example, they not only view the production of one of Shakespeare's plays as a political and historical event, but also show the manner in which the coronation of Elizabeth I is invested with symbolic connotations commonly found in literary texts.

New historicists also indicate that it would be treacherous to try to reconstruct the past, the time in which the text was produced, as we are conditioned by the social and historical reality of our own times. Many new historicists are deeply influenced by the Foucaultian view that no historical event is the product of a single cause; a number of economic, social and political factors intermix to produce it. **Michel Foucault** and **Louis Althusser** analyzed history in terms of power, which according to them was itself a complex web of forces that act upon both the disempowered and the empowered. Even a tyrannical aristocrat does not simply wield power, but is empowered by discourses and practices that constitute power. A major concern for New Historicism, therefore, is to analyze the cultural processes by which subversion or dissent is ultimately contained by 'power'. These ideas have significantly influenced the study of both Romantic and Early Modern literature. **Stephen Greenblatt's** *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) and *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988) are exemplary models of this school of criticism. Other writers associated with New Historicism mode of criticism of Early Modern texts are **Jonathan Goldberg**, **Stephen Orgel**, **Lisa Jardine** and **Louis Montrose**.

It is quite clear that New Historicism covers a wide range of approaches to the study of literature and history. Much like feminist literary criticism, it has questioned and provided possible alternative interpretations of much of canonical literature. However, feminist literary critics have always critiqued the new historicist tendency of focusing primarily on familiar privileged texts and ignoring the links between gender and power. Although New Historicism helps to interpret these texts in a new manner, there is no effort to challenge the canon itself. New historicists have never displayed a desire to create an alternative cannon or to focus on the texts that remain neglected. This runs contrary to the feminist literary critics 'gynocritical' approach to literature which focuses on women as writers and writings by women. As **Elaine Showalter** defined, the purpose of gynocritics is to bring to the foreground the hitherto lost traditions of women's literary works and to investigate the characteristics and contexts of these works. Books like **Ellen Moers's** *Literary Women* (1976), **Elaine Showalter's** *A Literature of their Own* (1977), and **Sandra M. Gilbert** and **Susan Gubar's** *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) establish this direction in feminist literary criticism.

**Check Your Progress:**

i) *What is New Historicism? How is it different from Historicism?*

ii) *What idea of Foucault influenced New Historicism?*

iii) *Why did feminist literary critics criticize New Historicism?*

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### 3.10 STRUCTURALISM AND FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM

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Structuralism as a literary movement developed in Paris of the 1950s and 1960s ( For a previous discussion of Structuralism, see MWG 003) . There were many factors for its advent. It can be seen as a reaction against Sartre's version of Existentialism, which also developed in Paris. Another factor that influenced structuralism was the growing force of the social or human sciences. Modernism, which had tried to keep social sciences at a distance, was already on the wane and Postmodernism was not yet a major force. During this time, Structural linguistics of **Ferdinand de Saussure** and Structural Anthropology of **Claude Levi-Strauss** ushered a new kind of critical thinking. The **Structuralist linguists**, like the **Semioticians**, were neither interested in promoting any particular literary movement nor in vouching for the importance of literature, but in explaining a text only in terms of language and its system of conventions. The focus in Structural linguistics, therefore, is the phono / lexico / grammatical constituents of any literary work and the differences between linguistic signs that create meaning. Structuralists , in their analysis of literary texts, are interested only in analyzing the structures that constitute a text. It espouses the view that no element in any system has any significance by itself and its full significance can only be perceived when it is integrated into the structure of which it is a part. Therefore, activity ranging from the actions within a narrative to action in real life occurs within a system of differences and hence has meaning only within that system. Meaning, therefore, emanates neither from nature or the divine but from the structure of the system itself.

Structuralist approaches to literature challenged some of the conventional beliefs of the ordinary reader. It was long felt that the essential source of a literary work was the author and a text was the mode through which a reader entered into a communion with an author's thoughts and feelings. Another assumption often made by readers is that a book tells us the truth about human life. However, Structuralists put forward the idea that the author is 'dead' and that a literary discourse does not need to have any truth-function. Structuralists always want to find the codes that according to them hold the text's meaning. Since literary texts are part of a common system and words acquire connotations within a shared system, they cannot mean anything in isolation. In other words, meaning is "intertextual" and necessarily understood in accordance with other texts within the same system.

You have already been introduced to the work of Ferdinand de Saussure in MWG 001 and MWG 003. Let us renew some of his ideas in the context of feminist literary criticism.



Ferdinand de Saussure's book *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) has been a great influence on semiotics and structuralism. Saussure makes a fundamental distinction between 'langue' and 'parole'. The former is the shared system which the speaker unconsciously draws upon while the latter is the realization of it in individual utterance. This is a crucial distinction as structuralism is interested in the system which forms the base of any human signifying practice, and not in the individual utterance. This essentially means that when a structuralist studies specific poems or myths or economic practices, she or he is interested not in the individual work but in the system of rules being employed to construct it.

Saussure argued that a linguist's objective should be to examine signs within a self-contained system and hence her/his focus should not be on 'diachronic' (changing over time) aspects of language but rather on 'synchronic' aspects (language as it exists at a particular moment of time in a specific community of people). The synchronic system can be evaluated in terms of two axes: the 'paradigmatic' and the 'syntagmatic.' The paradigmatic focuses on the "fixed" value of signs based on their immediate associations with other signs while syntagmatic is concerned with the "dynamic" meaning brought about by the order or sequence of signs. Although both are required in a structural analysis, the paradigmatic continues to be structuralism's primary concern on the virtue of being systematizable.

The rigorous textualism of the structuralist school was critiqued by feminists who felt that such an exercise systematically disregarded literature's potential for social criticism. To view the text merely as a structure that had to be understood in terms of a shared set of rules was to disregard its social context. This was unacceptable to feminist literary critics as they felt that the structures themselves are often conditioned by patriarchal cultural stereotypes. The structural school was seen by feminist literary critics as an enterprise by professional elites to deny the connection between texts and the world beyond them. Moreover, drawing upon ideas that developed during Poststructuralism (for a detailed analysis of Poststructuralism and its relation to feminism see the next section), feminist literary critics showed that no social or linguistic structure can be completely stable and hence any desire to form a stable center and thereby fix its 'Other' is not possible. In a structuralist analysis of a literary text, it was the *enonce* (utterance) that was privileged over *enunciation* (the act of uttering in a specific material and social context), but this faces challenge from feminist critics who argued that the site of the discourse cannot be separated from the discourse itself. Any effort to do so is ultimately covertly or overtly complicit with silencing the voice of protest that denies the pluralism that is crucial to alternative modes of thinking.

**Check Your Progress:**

i) *What is Structuralism?*

ii) *Why does Structuralism insist that meaning is “intertextual”?*

iii) *How does feminist literary criticism critique Structuralism?*

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### **3.11 POSTSTRUCTURALISM AND FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM**

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The term Poststructuralism refers to a number of separate theoretical practices which have a common aim: to critique the idea that human societies and traditions can be comprehended according to structures that are both unchanging and universal, and that are reproduced in texts and other modes of expression. **Jacques Derrida** in his essay ‘*Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*’ (1966) argues that the concept of a fixed center in every structure as espoused by Structuralism, is erroneous. In Poststructuralism, this center is deconstructed and exposed to illustrate incoherence and contradictions within it. Poststructuralists, therefore, question the very premise of Structural analysis of a literary text based on the notion of a fixed center. It argues that it is impossible for language to designate the center, if essentially there is no center, only irresolvable contradictions. Since there is no guarantee of a stable and

stabilizing authority, no single criteria for arriving at the absolute truth, the faith displayed by structuralists on a fixed structure is bound to be erroneous. This situation essentially entails that we now survive in a decentered universe and therefore the very possibility of a center in literary texts in comparison to which an 'Other' can be constructed does not exist.

Poststructuralism emerged in France in the late 1960s, and the two figures largely credited in ushering in this shift from Structuralism are **Roland Barthes** and **Jacques Derrida**. It is during this time that Barthes' ideas shifted from his structuralist to his poststructuralist phase. Like **Foucault**, he rejected the conventional figure of the author from whom the text originates and argues in '*The Death of the Author*' (1968) that the concept of a God-like author needs to be replaced by a 'scriptor', a force that is neither apriori nor post-textual. The same is true of the reader, but this is concurrent with the death of the author. He also argues that the death of the author unshackles the text from any fixity and allows for endless free play of meanings.

Jacques Derrida, another crucial figure associated with Poststructuralism, in his essay 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' (1966) argues that the decentering of the intellectual universe made it impossible to view the world anymore from the erstwhile privileged white Western parameters. Since the 'Self' is no longer fixed, the 'Other' cannot be located anymore. In such a decentered existence, instead of any movement away from a given center, we can only have the free play of multiple possibilities. There is no longer any guaranteed fact as there is no authoritative center that can validate the facts.

As you have previously learnt in the Unit on Feminism and Deconstruction, in MWG 003, feminist literary criticism, as expected, found an ally in poststructuralist thoughts. They embrace the plurality emphasized in different poststructuralist schools to challenge the concept of patriarchal standards. **Julia Kristeva's** early feminist-poststructuralist semiology has much in common with ideas of Barthes and Derrida. She also drew upon M. M. Bakhtin's ideas to emphasize the polyphonic nature of any novel and its constitutive ambivalence. In a manner quite similar to Jacques Lacan's *jouissance*, pleasure brought about by proximity to the unconscious processes, Kristeva talks about the *chora*, which is a supremely pleasurable experience of the *Imaginary* brought about by the bond between the mother and child in the pre-Oedipal stage. She argues that once freed from any restrictive structure, the reading experience can be similarly ecstatic. In a poststructuralist reading Kristeva argues that a structured system (ego, language) is disrupted by an excess of signs. This is crucial for feminist literary critics as they try to emphasize the impossibility of restricting woman's experience within certain given parameters, especially in texts, as contradictions lie within the very texts, within the language system itself.

As a poststructuralist-feminist critic, Kristeva argues that the body itself can be seen as the ultimate structure: systematized at various levels, elaborately cross-referenced and coded, but still immensely capable of challenging the codes. (For a detailed discussion of French feminism and psychoanalysis, also see MWG 004, Block 4 , Unit2 )

***Check Your Progress:***

i) *What is Poststructuralism?*

ii) *How does Poststructuralism differ from Structuralism?*

iii) *How does feminist literary critics interact with Poststructuralism?*

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## 3.12 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit, we have tried to see the different ideas associated with feminism and feminist literary criticism and their course of development. We have also tried to see the feminist resistance to theory itself. There has been an effort to understand the complex manner in which feminist literary criticism interacts with different schools of theory. In order to do this we have critically analyzed the basic ideas associated with different schools of theory and their relation to feminist literary criticism. Many of these issues have also been dealt with in different contexts in some of your other courses, as mentioned within the unit. You will find it helpful to review the relevant sections provided in the cross references for a deeper understanding of the stated issues.

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## 3.13 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) Trace the development of feminism and the manner in which it challenges patriarchal views.
- 2) Analyze the different trends in feminist literary criticism. Why does it display a distrust of theory?
- 3) What is New Criticism? Why and how does feminist literary criticism critique it? Discuss.
- 4) What is Russian Formalism? Why does it face criticism from feminist literary critics?
- 5) What are the basic ideas of Reader Response Theory? How does feminist literary criticism interact with it?
- 6) What is New Historicism? How does feminist literary criticism interact with it?
- 7) What are the ideas associated with Structuralism and why does feminist literary criticism critique Structuralism?
- 8) What is Poststructuralism? How does feminist literary critics interact with it?

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## 3.14 REFERENCES

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### 3.15 SUGGESTED READINGS

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