UNIT 1 REPRESENTATION

Structure

1.1 Introduction

1.2 Objectives

1.3 Understanding Representation
   1.3.1 What is Representation?
   1.3.2 Gender as Key Issue
   1.3.3 Women and Self-Representation
   1.3.4 Dangers of Misrepresentation

1.4 Question of Identity

1.5 Role of Language in Representation
   1.5.1 Language - The Shaping Art
   1.5.2 Language Ideology
   1.5.3 Significance of Women’s Language
   1.5.4 How Language Treats Women
   1.5.5 Women’s Use of Language

1.6 Discourse Analysis
   1.6.1 Understanding Discourse Analysis
   1.6.2 The Role of Silences

1.7 Significance of Oral Traditions for Women
   1.7.1 Story Telling and Women
   1.7.2 Anecdotes, Folklore and Myths
   1.7.3 Revisionist Myth-Making

1.8 Let Us Sum Up

1.9 Unit End Questions

1.10 Suggested Readings

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Language is what we use to represent ourselves and to communicate with others. Language also plays a very important role in how women represent themselves and how they may be represented or misrepresented by others. The aim of this unit is to introduce you to the significance of representation in feminist study. We shall discuss associated concepts like gender, identity, stereotypes, culture and ideology to examine the dangers of misrepresentation, the role of language ideology in women’s representations, and the differences between women’s and men’s use of language. We will also try to understand discourse analysis and its significance from a feminist perspective.
1.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, you will be able to:
• Understand the terms representation and misrepresentation;
• Examine the significance of these terms in feminist studies;
• Discuss the role language and language ideology play in feminist research;
• Understand the implication of oral traditions and story-telling in women’s repertoire; and
• Locate the importance of discourse analysis in various fields of study like literature, language, and sociology.

1.3 UNDERSTANDING REPRESENTATION

Let us first read what is meant by representation. Before you begin, you may also find it helpful to read the earlier discussion on Representation in Unit 2, Block 2, MWG 003.

1.3.1 What is Representation?

The simple dictionary meaning of ‘Representation’ is: the act of representing or the state of being; something that represents as an image or a symbol like a verbal or pictorial portrait. You have already read about representation in MWG 003, Block 2, Unit 2, where we looked at gendered representations in cinema, in the light of debates on representation ranging from Plato to Edward Said. Here, let us probe the nature of representations further, before delving into the relationship between gender and representation.

Imagination and preconceived notions play an important role in the creation of representation. Representation deals with the question: who can speak, on behalf of whom, for and about whom? In feminist study this debate has been ongoing since long. For feminists, one of the important aspects of representation is to enable women to re-present themselves because they have not been able to speak for themselves or present their viewpoint or, were relegated to the margins.

Representations are based on social reality and hence are social constructs. That is to say, there are always taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs behind every representation and there are no ‘originals’ which might be represented truthfully. Let us put it in the form of a question: What do we visualize when we utter the word ‘woman’? Depending on who is being asked this question, the answer may generate a stereotypical image: a person bound to domestic work, one who nurtures and brings up children, small in size, low in IQ, home-bound, subordinate and submissive,
but also soft and tender, needing protection and so on. Indeed, women are not represented as independent agents or individuals but as part of a social context, that is, in the perspective of family, friends, and colleagues.

In patriarchy, women are viewed as objects rather than subjects, passive rather than active. Often their passivity extends to victimhood. Men, on the other hand, are represented as decision-makers, powerful, and in control of things. You may be familiar with the phrase ‘wear the pants/ trousers’? Well, a person who ‘wears the pants’ controls things and makes decisions. In family and also in society it is the male who has the prerogative to make decisions and is in the subject position. Thus, we can conclude that the constitution of the secondary position of women is determined by gender.

If you are able to represent yourself as you are, you assume the subject position and concomitantly, the rest are the ‘others’. The process of ‘othering’ is inseparably linked to self-representation. In the patriarchal system, man is in a speaking position, so he is the ‘self’, all those about whom or for whom he speaks are the ‘other’. The speaker has the active role and an element of control. Women are deprived of this central/active role and are muted.

While mainstream poetry often reflects this marginalization of women, women poets do not see woman as a bundle of weaknesses. On the contrary, they find strength in women’s forbearance and want them to speak out. In a poem ‘Sita Speak’ published in The Indian Express (17th November, 1985), Bina Agarwal advises Sita to speak her side of the story because we are familiar with the other side. History mentions only the few brave women who fought the enemy with manly valour but the women who remained behind the scene are invisible because they are not given representation. In economics, representation is needed to give them financial standing while in politics women are represented through women candidates.

Feminist critics have emphasised the importance of analysing literature, media and other fields to examine women’s representation by both men and women. Some of the prominent texts of the 1960s and 1970s like Kate Millet’s Sexual Politics (1970), Elaine Showalter’s A Literature of Their Own: British Women From Bronte to Lessing (1977), and many others have questioned the social frameworks in which women have been relegated to stereotypical images as passive, masochistic and male-identified. In short, they have interrogated the unquestioned acceptance of men’s portrayals of women. Acceptance means submission to the existing social-cultural structures; it also means acquiescence to the culturally constructed, one-sided view of women’s reality.

The work of feminist writers and theorists has resulted in the unearthing of women’s tradition of writing, their history and the use of language to
ascertain their need to express themselves as they are, what they are, what they feel. That is to say, they wanted a ‘voice’. Caroline Ramazanoglu (1989) a feminist critic opines that the most obvious principle of social transformation is to take women’s own account of their experience as part of their situation thus allowing previously silent voices to be heard and also to make the other side (patriarchy in this case) aware of their joys and sorrows, problems and strengths.

**Box No.1.1**

*In gender studies the issue of representation is a significant one for research as well as for political activity. Representation covers the fields of literature, politics, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies and in fact many other disciplines because representation/voice is an important factor for access to power.*

Let us now read how gender is a key issue while talking about representation.

### 1.3.2 Gender as Key Issue

Gender is a key issue when discussing representation. Essential elements of our own identity, and the identities we imagine for other people, come from concepts of gender what does it mean to be a boy or a girl? That gender is the most important factor in our lives is borne out by the first question we ask when a child is born, ‘Is it a boy or a girl?’ Since gender is a cultural construct, our perception of gender can vary with socio-cultural changes. Simone de Beauvoir said in her book *The Second Sex*, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (Beauvoir, 1964, p. 249). This implies that someone born a female becomes a ‘woman’ according to the socially acceptable characteristics of a woman. It is the process of ‘becoming.’ Gender is learnt through the process of socializing and is governed by the culture of a particular society. As a gender, women have certain rights and privileges but they are often subject to patriarchal norms and restrictions. In the quest for social justice and equality, there is dire need to identify the disadvantages experienced by women and this can be done only when they get a chance to represent themselves.

Thus, we can see that it is important to examine gender as a social category in order to understand the category of ‘woman’. But gender needs to be understood as something that is expressed, singled out, and positioned within theories of embodiment, their meanings and relationships. One could propose that the notion of gender includes the following three elements:

- meaning and signification (social experience);
- social relations of men and women (psychological aspect); and
- social identity (symbolic element). The above three aspects are important to understand what being a woman represents and how women represent themselves.
1.3.3 Women and Self-Representation

As we have read above, traditionally, women are represented as being weak; or let us say, being ‘different’ from the male sex. Shakespeare said, “Frailty thy name is woman” (Hamlet, I:ii:146); in fact, there are many more such portrayals in which masculinity sets the boundaries. Feminists have made a concerted effort to reject such stereotypical definitions and have moved forward to explore what being a woman represents from a woman’s perspective.

Representation is women’s attempt to think about themselves as women, and about the way they relate to the world around them. Women may represent themselves as a group or as individuals in written or oral texts; they may also be represented by others. Moreover, representation connotes a specific political act. For example, women’s struggle for the right to participate directly in political systems as voters meant the right to represent and be represented politically. Sociologically, representation means their view of their own social situation; their everyday world as determined by the social process. In literature, it stands for their own writings in which they can express their inner-most feelings and experiences. Let us take, for instance, the experience of being the victim of domestic violence, or dowry demands, or marginality in general that many women in India may experience. A male writer may write about such experiences, but his account will be that of an outsider. Since over the ages, women have not been able to represent themselves or their experiences, and since they have often been misrepresented in patriarchal societies, both representation and misrepresentation must be considered together. Below, we will look at some of the dangers of the latter.

1.3.4 The Dangers of Misrepresentation

All representation functions within certain socially defined limits and as such acts of misrepresentation are an inherent part of any given representational system because systems are always partial and always subject to interpretation. No act of representation can ever take place entirely outside of ideology. And women as part of the existing ideology also participate, knowingly or unknowingly, in acts of misrepresentation. For example, there was a time when women writers were looked down upon. A woman entering the literary field was seen as a freak, someone who belonged to the margin, a second rate person, and if at all she was allowed some space it was a special favour. Many early women writers in England used male names to hide their identity, say for example, Mary Ann Cross wrote under the name George Eliot. In her novel The Binding Vine (1992), Shashi Deshpande portrays how a renowned poet, Venu, reacts when a young woman shows him her verse. He rebuffs her, saying, “Why do you
need to write poetry? It is enough for a young woman like you to give birth to children. That is your poetry” (Deshpande, 1992, p. 127). Such instances from literature show that women had to be content with the picture men gave of them; and also that the patriarchal system thought of them as body and not as brain.

Box No. 1.2

*Representation means presenting the perspectives of those who have not been able to represent themselves.*

We need to understand the individual experiences of women but we also need commonalities to be ascertained and experience to be made collective. Women’s experiences are different from men’s but difference does not mean inequality, and therefore should not signify unequal relationships. Difference leads to misrepresentation and misinterpretation. Because of difference the patriarchal world is dismissive of women, their needs and demands.

In this context, we need to examine the ways in which representations of gender help structure cultural perceptions of women. In the Indian socio-cultural psyche woman is deified as ‘devi’, the goddess. But this is also misrepresentation of a social reality because by putting woman on the pedestal man denies her human weaknesses, desires and wants. She is seen not as a human individual but as a symbol.

Feminists resist categorization and are concerned with the notions of women’s so-called nature - both as the supposed source of representation of women in general and as a limitation on women’s ability to represent themselves in particular. We must explore how women define themselves and are defined as women within various systems of representation. Enabling women to define themselves means accepting their own perceptions of their unique identity as unique individuals in their own right.

1.4 QUESTION OF IDENTITY

Gender identity refers to how one thinks of one’s gender: male or female. What are the society’s prescribed rules and norms for gender roles, i.e. how one is supposed to and not supposed to dress, act, think, feel, speak, relate to others, what one thinks of oneself, etc. as per one’s sex. In other words, this leads us to ponder on what is ‘possible’ and what is ‘permissible’ for each of the two genders. One is required by social norms to abide by the conventional rules of perceived gender identity categories. These identity categories are demarcated by the ‘body’.
The idea of representation is closely associated with ‘difference’ and ‘identity’. So, we must ascertain how identity politics is important for comprehending the idea of representation. The view that all representations are ‘re-presentations’ means there is no original. When there is no original, with what do women identify? Identity is crucial for women because by and large they are the repositories of culture. Gender definitions are central to all cultures and their sense of collective identity. So, women need to redefine their roles and see where they stand.

When women attempt to redefine their roles and expand their arena of choices, patriarchy resents these notions because their actions may necessitate re-structuring of the existing social and political norms and also because redefinition may lead to self-definition and identity formation. Articulation of identity has to be understood as a function of historical, social and material circumstances.

Women try to capture in their writings those moments that are crucial in the shaping of their identity as the gendered subjects. Notions of femininity, of respectability, of honour often shape the reaction of women to questions of sexuality. In the film Fire (1996) for example, Deepa Mehta uses feminism in a manner that does not fit into the normal socially accepted discourses. This film generated feminist discussion regarding the representation of lesbianism in the film and also the ire of society. Representation in the cinema requires both language and visual depiction; other disciplines like literature and social sciences depend on language to delineate reality.

Before reading further take up the following exercise to assess your understanding of what you have read till now in this unit.

**Check Your Progress:**

1. What is understood by representation and misrepresentation?
Let us now read about the role of language in representation.

1.5 ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN REPRESENTATION

The role of representation can be seen under the categories of shaping art, ideology and how language treat women. Let read about each of these aspects in detail.

1.5.1 Language - The Shaping Art

The ability to use language, whether oral or written, is one of the most important characteristics of human beings. Language is not neutral; it is not simply a carrier of ideas but it is a shaper of ideas. It is a means of self-expression and is co-related with socio-cultural facts of one’s upbringing, environment, class, nationality and such other basic attributes. This is called ‘language socialization’ which means people learn how they are expected to categorize themselves socially and how people in those categories are expected to talk.

Box No.1.3

Women as a category employ language differently than men do and hence ‘women’s language’ is believed to display their female identity.

Researchers claim that language and gender are related to the association between language and the social contexts because it is the social context that forms our concepts of how men and women use language. Feminist
linguist Deborah Cameron (1985) argues that the activities that women and men participate in and the way they communicate provide clear indication of the relationship of language to gender. Men and women differ in their communicative manner and critics assert that language ideology plays an important role in gendered use of language.

### 1.5.2 Language Ideology

Language ideology is based on the concept of the standardized version of a language. When we say ‘standard’ English or ‘standard’ Hindi or for that matter any language we set a typical criterion to measure its correctness. Thus, standardization indicates the presence of an ideology, or in other words, the notion that there is a correct and incorrect way to speak the language; that words are pronounced certain ways and mean certain things.

> “Language ideology has to do with the ways in which language is conceived of and thought to articulate with other aspects of social life” (Johnstone, 2002, p. 54).

This is based on the beliefs about how language expresses social reality and values, correctness of behavior and manner of speaking; language ideology also impacts the knowledge about the functions of language and the belief about the speaker’s or language user’s identity. Basic faculties like thinking and basic concepts like personhood and identity are so intricately associated with our language facilities that language ideologies tend to segregate the sexes.

**Language ideologies play an important role in various areas of our public and private life.** For example, in the field of education, curricula are changed, reformed and designed from time to time to fit in with norms of appropriateness and correctness. Of late, reading material for school children is so designed as to use gender neutral language, like ‘chairperson’ instead of ‘chairman’. Language ideology is of interest to scholars in the fields of linguistics, literature, feminism, linguistic anthropology, sociology, psychology, politics and many others because language affects social relations, and concomitantly brings in socio-cultural changes. Linguistic choices show how people conceive of language and pave the way for political processes in the context of global economic and cultural changes.

### 1.5.3 Significance of Women’s Language

We know by now that language is a tool. Not only that, it is a powerful and essential tool which people use to express, control and also alter existing power relations. A potent example of how language can alter power relations is provided in William Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest* where Caliban says,

> “you taught me language, and my profit on’t/Is, I know how to curse” (I:ii:363).

That is, he is using the master’s tool to liberate himself.
Language is also the basis for gender differences. Some linguists believe that women are aware of their low status in society because in the patriarchal structure it is the male who wields the power. Women’s use of language often reflects their powerlessness since it has evolved as a way of surviving without control over economic, physical or social reality. Socio-linguists also claim that women tend to speak politely because of their inferior status to men and because politeness is expected from inferiors in hierarchical relationships. Although, we cannot make a sweeping and generalized statement in this matter as language use is governed by the social and cultural factors and is different in different cultures, it cannot be denied that women are at a disadvantage because language is a male construct and women are forced to use the ‘master’s language’ as it is.

Feminist research has examined how gender difference is reflected in the use of language in everyday interaction. In the next following sections, we will look at two other significant aspects to the use of language: how language treats women differently, and how women use language differently from men.

1.5.4 How Language Treats Women

We can identify three main factors that show how language uses women. These are:

- ignoring,
- defining,
- devaluing.

Let us look at each of these more closely below.

Ignoring: Words such as ‘he’ or ‘man’ when presented without context are judged as unambiguously signifying both male and female. These are known as ‘masculine generics’ and are widely accepted. Sentences like ‘Each candidate is required to sign his name’ or ‘Man must do his duty,’ traditionally indicate that ‘man’ includes ‘woman’, when the sex is not specified. This grammatical rule not only makes women invisible but also shows masculine-bias. Feminists have suggested the use of both pronouns together as in ‘Each candidate is required to sign his/her name’ or the use of general terms for human beings when denoting men and women in general, as for example in ‘Human beings must do their duty.’

Defining: Language also defines women’s status vis-à-vis men’s and by inference gives them secondary position. Let us look at the titles of respect, Mrs or Miss. These implicitly show whether or not a woman has sanctified relationship with the male, not so with Mr. However, the term Mr has its own position unqualified by woman’s presence or absence in a man’s life. Analogous to this are the terms in Hindi or some regional languages - Shri and Shrimati. Likewise in Marathi, the apppellative for a married woman
with a living husband is Saubhagyawati and in the Southern languages, Sumangali. For man there is no such defining yardstick.

The fact that language conditions our thinking and attitudes is supported by appellations like ‘lady doctor,’ ‘lady lecturer,’ ‘lady pilot’. These appellations specify the gender and also women’s intrusion into the male field. On the contrary, the masculine words such as, doctor, engineer, or pilot, have prestige and positive import and assume that the owner of the term is a man.

Devaluation: Terms of endearment used by men for women like ‘chic’ or ‘babe’ highlight how language devalues women. Moreover, some words used for women have derogatory connotations, like mistress, witch, and governess; on the contrary, master, wizard, governor have elevated status. If a plan or work is of high quality we call it masterful; your credit card is Mastercard; and if you write a brilliant book or produce an excellent work of art, it turns out to be your masterpiece. The feminine words have acquired trivialized meanings.

The following exercise will help you to assess your understanding of the above discussion:

**Check Your Progress:**

i) Fill in the blanks with the appropriate words:
   
   a) Representations are based on …… and hence are ………
   
   b) The person who is in speaking position is the ……..; those about/for whom the speaker speaks is the ……..
   
   c) ……… wrote, “woman is made, not born.”
   
   d) Revisionist mythmaking is an …….. reading of mythology.
   
   e) …….. is basically a methodology to study and understand the text through language use.

ii) Make a list of at least five words which devalue women vis-à-vis words used for the masculine quality.
1.5.5 Women’s Use of Language

It has been pointed out that women use ‘fillers’ like *I think, I guess, sort of* etc. more often. These reflect uncertainty on the part of the speaker and also a lack of self-confidence. Along with fillers they use tag questions, like “it’s warm today, isn’t it?” Use of tag questions with intonation also denotes weakness, uncertainty, lack of self-confidence and inferiority. Linguists observe that women use ‘hedges’ because they are culturally conditioned and told that it is not polite or ‘lady-like’ to assert. In conversation women avoid the use of words that command or give directives. Instead, their language use has more suggestion, asking questions, wondering and discussion (like: ‘Will you open the window, please?’ instead of ‘open the window, please’). This is indicative of extra politeness. They are expected to use more polite intonation and language and talk less in mixed-sex groups. This is called, as we have said above, their ‘language socialization.’ Generally, they do not use strong expletives like ‘damn’, ‘shit’ etc. Their linguistic behavior is characterized as supportive, co-operative and non-assertive.

These facts can be further revealed and justified/substantiated by discourse analysis. Discourse analysis in linguistics, literature and social sciences can show how language puts women in a frame. Let us turn to this issue in the next section.

1.6 DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

In the previous Sections, we have looked at the nature of representation from a gendered perspective. As we have seen, representation often takes place through language, or a similar system of spoken, written or visual signs. This brings us to the realm of discourse and its analysis. Let us begin with an understanding of what we mean by discourse analysis.

1.6.1 Understanding Discourse Analysis

Before we study discourse analysis, let us understand the two terms separately: ‘discourse’ and ‘analysis’. Discourse means any talk, writing, or sign/symbol. Its plural ‘discourses’ means the conventional ways of talking or writing that create ideology or set of beliefs about our world or the society. Analysis stands for the practice of systematically taking things apart and looking at them from different perspectives.

**Discourse analysis basically is the study of language.** A given text or any written document or oral use of language is examined to see how language has shaped relationships, or the world. But, discourse analysis is different from linguistic analysis. In linguistic analysis language is examined as an abstract form. In discourse analysis the interest of the analyst is to go
deeper and explore what happens when language is used in a particular manner; what feelings are expressed; what picture of society or human behaviour emerges, and with what results, and how words create a separate ambience from what is apparent. Students of history, sociology, psychology, feminism, language and literature, rhetoric, cultural studies and in fact many other disciplines can use discourse analysis to study the form or function of a text.

**Box No. 1.4**

*We can then define ‘discourse analysis’ as a methodology that is useful in understanding how systems of representation function from the perspectives of linguists or social scientists.*

*Discourse analysts propose questions and seek to find the ‘location of meaning’ which can be found in ‘the speaker’s intention, in the literal text, in the audiences’ interpretation’. Contrary to much of traditional linguistics, discourse analysts not only study language use beyond the sentence boundary, but also prefer to analyze ‘naturally occurring’ language use which Johnstone likes to call ‘languaging’ (Johnstone, 2002, p. 263). It sheds light on how meaning can be elicited via given information or how in a conversation a speaker reveals her/his intentions or cognitive abilities. Discourse analysis helps in answering questions about the role of language in human cognition, art and social life. In gender studies, discourse analysis answers questions about social relations, personal and social identity, self-definitions, dominance, social and personal adaptation. In short, it functions as meaning-making and is at the centre of human experience and activity.*

Let us take an example to see how discourse analysis works. In the novel entitled *Forever Free* written by **Raji Narasimhan** some women characters talk about the protagonist thus, ‘It’s like a man, she is, arguing and going to the bottom of things. She’s like a man.’ Even if we do not know the context, we can analyse these two sentences to reveal different aspects:

1) the protagonist is a woman (‘she’ pronoun);
2) she appears to be a strong character (personal trait);
3) women do not argue vehemently as men do (social expectation);
4) women do not go to the bottom of things (generalized ideology); and
5) the women who are discussing her, seem to resent her because she is ‘like a man’ or may be they appreciate her for her independence.

The above two sentences from the novel are silent on the nuances we brought to light by our analysis. This means that ‘silence’ also articulates many things and needs to be understood.
1.6.2 The Role of Silences

‘Silences’ mean those statements that are in the background, that are not expressed but have been implied and understood. In the above example, the speakers did not say that they are jealous or that they deprecate the protagonist. They are silent on the issue but we can notice it. Silence also means lack of voice, overt restriction placed on speaking or prohibition imposed on expression, exclusion from highly valued forms like rhetoric, or public speaking. Words such as ‘absent’ women, ‘missing’ women, ‘invisible’ women indicate women’s silences. The idea behind discourse analysis is to detect silences. In her book *Discourse Analysis*, Barbara Johnstone observes, “learning to notice silences means learning to ‘de-familiarize’ the familiar” (Johnstone, 2002, pp. 58-61). This is one way that may lead to give power and control to the ‘silent other’.

Cinema, literary works, art, rhetoric and many other fields offer a lot of potential to study and understand the role silences play. Take for example, the movie ‘Pipli Live’ (2010). Discourse analysis can show you many ‘unsaid’ things about our present socio-political system. Another example can be the movie ‘Arth’ (1982) where silences, social insecurities of a single woman, the psychological problems generated by guilt can be analyzed. Silences can be read in male writings as well. In *Manohar Malgonkar’s* novel *The Princes* (1963), the king often boosts the morale of his son by exhorting him to be a man. It means be ‘strong and brave’. The sentence does not say ‘women are weak.’ It is silent on this aspect but discourse analysis reveals the intended meaning and the social expectation that men should be strong.

**Discourse can be both written and oral.** Oral traditions have a particular significance from the perspective of women since historically, women have been excluded from literary traditions and have been forced to find their voices within oral traditions. Let us look at this aspect next. But, before that take up the following exercise.

**Check Your Progress:**

i) Comment briefly on ‘language socialization’.
Let us read about significance of oral traditions for women in the following section.

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF ORAL TRADITIONS FOR WOMEN

Oral tradition refers to the cultural information passed on from one generation to the next by storytellers. It expresses self-identity and upholds social organizations, religious practices, ethical values and customary laws. The messages or testimony are verbally transmitted in speech or song and may take the form of folktales, anecdotes, sayings, ballads, songs, or chants. In this way, it is possible for a society to transmit oral history, oral literature, oral law and other knowledges across generations without a writing system.

1.7.1 Story Telling and Women

Traditionally, women are the repositories of oral traditions. When studying women’s writing one comes across use of oral forms which give distinction to their works because they are different from men’s approach. In The Thousand Faces of the Night (1993), Gita Hariharan makes profuse use of oral stories told by Devi’s grandmother to induct values in her. Some women writers bring in folk tales to narrate an event. Even Raja Rao uses the story-telling technique in Kanthapura where the story teller is an old woman.

1.7.2 Anecdotes, Folklore and Myths

The use of myths, anecdotes and folk/fairy tales reflect woman’s consciousness of her body. The physical experience of being a woman is different from a man’s experience of his body. As psychologist Sudhir Kakar (1996, pp.63-64) points out, the dominant narrative of Hindu culture is that of Devi, the destroyer of evil as symbolized by Durga or Kali. While cultural studies can delve deep into the myths to ascertain women’s place
Language Representation and Feminist Approaches

in patriarchy or history, literature often makes use of these figures to study the psyche of their protagonists. In Bharati Mukherjee’s novel *Jasmine* (1991, p.117), the protagonist kills her molester and poses as Kali. Shashi Deshpande (1993, pp. 95-101) uses the figure of Amba in her short story ‘The Inner Rooms’ to show the power of a woman’s revenge and also to critique the two faces of patriarchal culture. Not only that, in life too women are considered good story tellers leading to the use of expressions like ‘grandmother’s tales’ or even ‘old wives’ tales’.

Myths uphold and support male authority because they have been the creation of patriarchy and are interpreted to suit male authority in a culture. This is done by submerging the female identity. The Sita, Sati, Savitri stories lay emphasis on chastity, purity and duty; the emphasis on ‘stree-dharma’ is meant to guide the wife in her path of duty to her husband. There can be many such examples not only from our culture but also from many others across the globe. Feminists are questioning the validity of these views. They are deconstructing the past to retrieve women’s lost status. This they are doing by re-visioning as well as by revisioning. Re-visioning presupposes looking again at the past and revisioning means to revise and write again.

1.7.3 Revisionist Myth-Making

Revisionist myth-making is an alternative reading of mythology and history. Feminist scholars have attempted to redefine culture and women’s place in the culture. They speak the past; re-interpret it; and re-write it from the woman’s point of view. If the woman was absent from a mythological tale, revision gives her the desired presence. Feminist critics consider it as an act of survival. It is an act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text and reinterpreting it with new critical perspective. For example, the Bible posits that God created Eve out of Adam’s rib. Feminists counter the view as devaluing women, aimed at giving them subordinate position. Feminists are retrieving women’s experience in religion, history and culture through re-visionary re-telling the stories, myth and tales. They are re-imagining the characters and trying to understand their psyche as human beings and not as stereotypical blocks.

Our mental picture of Sita is that of a mild, submissive, gentle being who is a symbol of piety for Indian woman. But there is a large body of literature that is subverting the myth. Discourse analysis has helped critics to understand Draupadi as a fiery personality. Mahasweta Devi uses the Draupadi myth to portray her tribal rebel protagonist Dropdi in her short story ‘Dropdi’. By revision, the authors rewrite myths or stories to create new ideologies and make social change possible.
Check Your Progress:

i) What does women’s tendency to use ‘tag questions’ and ‘fillers’ denote?
   a) social expectations
   b) uncertainty
   c) politeness
   d) hesitation

ii) Name the authors of the following books:
   a) The Second Sex
   b) Sexual Politics
   c) A Literature of Their Own
   d) Discourse Analysis

iii) What is the difference between ‘revision’ and ‘re-vision’?
1.8 LET US SUM UP

We have seen that representation means the ability to speak for one’s self, to express one’s ideas, desires and to define the self. Representation empowers women because it gives them a subject position and an autonomous agency. The autonomous being seeks to authorize itself through speech; speech requires ‘voice’ and voice invokes the idea of ‘presence’ which counters ‘absence’. We have also seen how representation is closely associated with questions of gender and identity. And since ‘voice’ is linked to speech, it is associated with language. Language ideology gives us tools to familiarize ourselves with the process of communication, speaking roles and relationships vis-à-vis language. Discourse analysis helps us to answer questions about the meaning inherent in the text and gives multidimensional social critique. Discourse can be written or oral. The latter has had a special significance for women since women are the repositories of culture and have always had the onus on them to transmit cultural knowledge from generation to generation through story-telling.

Myths, folklore and anecdotes play a significant role in women’s story-telling. Even in their literature women have been using folk/mythical material. Finally, we saw how Revisionist myth-making plays an important role in rewriting the old myths and stories to ascertain proper representation to women. This unit has given you a broad idea about the importance of language and representation for women. In the remaining units of this block, we will build further upon some of these questions.

1.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) What is representation? Discuss its importance in gender studies.

2) Define discourse analysis and its significance for gender studies.

3) Discuss the concept of revisionist mythmaking and comment on its importance for representation.

4) Explain with suitable examples, defining, ignoring and devaluing in relation to how language treats women.

5) Given below is a line from Nissim Ezekiel’s popular poem ‘Night of the Scorpion.’ Analyze the portrayal of the mother:

   “Thank God the scorpion picked on me/ and spared my children.”

6) Read Henrik Ibsen’s play The Dolls’s House and make a list of the words of endearment that Helmer uses for his wife Nora. Then, try to find how Nora is represented by Helmer and how Nora represents herself.
1.7 REFERENCES


1.8 SUGGESTED READINGS
