UNIT 3 GENEALOGIES

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, we learnt how memory is used as a feminist device in postmodern literature. In this unit we will go on to trace a genealogy of debate between postmodernism and feminism. While tracing all the strands of this debate is practically impossible, an attempt will be made to look at the duplicitous relationship between postmodernism and feminism through the works of Linda Nicholson and Nancy Frazer, Jane Flax and Linda Hutcheon among others. This unit will also look at the relationship between deconstruction and feminism, something that has already been covered by you in your unit on “Feminism & Deconstruction” (MWG 003, Block 1, Unit 4.4). Here, we will examine the two concepts of ‘ms. en abyme’ (‘woman in infinite deferral’) and ‘gynesis’ (discussed in 3.3.3 of this unit), as instances of postmodern feminism. Further, the unit will explore the problematization of gendered subjectivity and subjectivity per se by implicating race too. To do so, we will look at the works of Norma Alarcon, Henry Giroux and finally examine the writings of bell hooks in detail, about whom you have already read in the previous unit.
3.2 OBJECTIVES

The unit will help you to:
- Discuss the relationship between postmodernism and feminism, highlighting both problematic and enabling aspects;
- Examine the relationship between deconstruction and feminism;
- Explain the concept of ‘ms en abyme’ (‘woman in infinite deferral’);
- Identify the tool of ‘gynesis’;
- Present a critique of essentialism, of gender and of race;
- Discuss these concepts in the writings of bell hooks; and
- Explore the enabling political potential of postmodern feminism.

3.3 POSTMODERNISM AND GENDER

You have already been introduced to some aspects of the relationship between postmodernism and gender in previous units of this course (see especially Block 2). We have previously looked at some of the enabling aspects of postmodern theory from a feminist perspective, as well as some of the inherent limitations of this relationship. Here, we will focus more specifically on the duplicitous aspects of the dialogue between postmodernism and gender.

3.3.1 Postmodernism and Gender: A Relationship of Duplicity

While some do argue that postmodernism provides for possibilities of subversive resistance politics, nowhere is this aspect of postmodernism more prominent than in feminism. This is why Laura Kipnis calls feminism “the political conscience of postmodernism.” She states, “Feminism is the paradigmatic political discourse of postmodernism” (Kipnis, 1988, p.158). The connection between the two has been brought out quite clearly by Craig Owens, who argues that the feminist critique of patriarchy and the postmodernist critique of representation are concomitant projects. This is because both are incredulous of grand narratives, which try to stand for all that is transcendental and universal, like “the constitutive male subject”; moreover, both critique binarism and both insist on the importance of “difference”.

The relationship between the two, however, is not simply complementary. As Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson point out in their work (1990), the two have a lot in common, but still they are somewhat wary of each other. For Fraser and Nicholson, this is because, in spite of their commonalties, postmodernism and feminism have proceeded in two different directions—of the philosophical and the social, respectively. However, Fraser and
Nicholson envisage a ‘postmodernist feminism’, where each would seek remedy for its drawbacks from the strengths of the other. Fraser and Nicholson visualize this category of ‘postmodernist feminism’ as being both philosophical and social at the same time and thereby combining the philosophical engagements of postmodernism with the socially oriented direction that feminism has taken: therefore, being historically and culturally specific; non-universalist, which does away with a unified subject; and taking gender along with other hierarchies that plague society.

Linda Hutcheon, on the other hand, argues that the primary connection between postmodernism and feminism is their problematization of the body and its sexuality. She says, “If, in the postmodern age, we do live in what has been called a recessionary erotic economy brought about by fear of disease and a fetishisation of fitness, the erotic cannot but be part of that general problematising of the body and its sexuality. And this is one of the sites of the conjunction of interest of both postmodernism and feminisms as they both zero in on the representation of and reference to that body and its subject positions” (Hutcheon, 1989, p.141). In listing the points of convergence between postmodernism and feminism, Hutcheon notes that both problematize representation and conventions, desire and subjectivity, in absolutely similar ways. This makes both postmodernism and feminism do away with a coherent idea of the subject empowered with desire. She says, “while the very notion of desire would seem to presuppose a coherent subjectivity, we have seen that much feminist and postmodern theory has worked to question and problematise this concept” (Hutcheon, 1989, p.143). However, in spite of their correspondences, Hutcheon says that the two cannot be conflated, because postmodernism has a duplicitous politics which can be appropriated by both the left and the right, while feminism has a straightforwardly anti-normative politics.

Developing this connection between feminism and postmodernism, Jane Flax, in her book Disputed Subjects (1994), shows that both together attack some of the foundational claims of psychoanalysis and work toward the same purpose. In another book, Thinking Fragments (1989), Flax describes postmodernism as built upon three theses: the death of Man, the death of History, and the death of Metaphysics. For her, the feminist supplementation to the Death of Man is the “Demystification of the Male Subject of Reason”; that to the Death of History is the “Engendering of Historical Narrative”; and that to the Death of Metaphysics is “Feminist Skepticism Toward the Claims of Transcendent Reason” (Flax, 1989). However, as Seyla Benhabib points out, these three theses can have a ‘weak’ and a ‘strong’ version, and while the ‘weak’ version may be appropriated into critical politics, the strong versions lead to nothing but affirmation of normativity. Therefore, while ‘weak’ versions may engage with the death of man, history and metaphysics by positing an anti-normative politics for feminism, ‘strong’ versions may go on to affirm the very opposite (Benhabib, 1992, pp. 213-18).
Thus, as is clear from the above discussion, there is a duplicitous relationship between postmodernism and feminism. Therefore it is not a surprise that it has been argued by several critics that feminism is a ruse that postmodernism uses to legitimize itself as progressive. However, this view fails to take into consideration the subversive deconstructive critique that postmodernism makes possible. It becomes imperative thus, in forwarding the connection between postmodernism and feminism to study the relationship of deconstruction to feminism. You have already covered some of the basic connections between the two in the unit on “Feminism and Deconstruction” (MWG 003, Block 1, Unit 4.4).

To sum up our discussion in this section, we can say that:

**Box No. 3.1**

1) Feminism is seen to give political legitimacy to postmodernism.
2) However, in its orientation, postmodernism has been more philosophical, while feminism has been more socially oriented.
3) The need is to envisage a ‘postmodern feminism’, which will be both social and philosophical.
4) A point of convergence between postmodern feminism has been its engagement with discourses of body and sexuality.
5) Yet, while postmodernism can be drawn on politics of the right and left, feminism remains anti-normative.
6) However, both in their anti-foundational stance can be potentially enabling.

**Check Your Progress:**

The main points of this section have been summed up for you in the box provided above. Try to explain each of these points in your own words to test your understanding.
3.3.2 Deconstruction and Feminism: of Ms. En Abyme

Both feminism and deconstruction adopt ethical positions, without according any foundation to the cause behind it, with their respective obligations being to difference and uncertainty itself. As Diane Elam says, “The obligation of feminism, I shall go on to argue, is an obligation to a sexual difference that, in effect comes from nowhere. [...] Feminism is about keeping sexual difference open as the space of a radical uncertainty. We do not yet know what women can do” (Elam, 1994, p.25). This is where deconstruction becomes relevant, feminism’s questioning of gender cannot stop at any rigid definition of the category of ‘woman’, but continue to show the infinite possibilities that the term contains. This is what Diane Elam, borrowing a Derridean term, calls ‘ms. en abyme’, or the ‘woman in infinite deferral’. The Derridean term is a word play on the French term ‘mise en abyme’ which was originally coined by André Gide to refer to something which is ‘placed into the abyss’, as in a work of art within another work of art, or a mirror image within another image. Since the French word ‘mise’ is phonetically equivalent to the word ‘ms.’ (which foregrounds ‘woman’), the term opens up the metaphor for feminist interpretations like those by Elam. Elam’s conception of ms. en abyme, allows her to conceive feminism beyond the subject-object duality. This is because, for her, women’s status is not redeemed if they gain subjectivity from objectivity, as subjectivity itself is also rooted in problems of foundations. Elam shows how, on the contrary, that ms. en abyme allows one to conceive subject/object positions as infinite and incalculable. This, Elam says, can be the contribution of deconstruction to a more politically conscious, and thus more efficacious feminism.

Elam goes on to clarify that this step within postmodern feminism to conceive the woman as ms. en abyme instead of a certainty is not to take the concrete politics of feminism away. On the contrary, she goes on to show how traditional feminism essentializes the white middle-class heterosexual woman as the norm for all of the world’s women. And, thus, conceiving women as ‘difference’ can only highlight the pluralities of women and make for a plural politics.

Elam recognizes three moments in the history of feminist thought where the difficulty in representing women as essences has been dealt with. She states, “First, those attempting to write the history of women have had to grapple with historiographic methods which themselves determine how the question of women may be phrased. Second, the recognition of women as necessarily located within a network of representations leads us to confront the categories of gender and sex as frameworks for identifying women. Third, the very difficulty of this identification positions women as undecidably divided between language and materiality; women risk becoming either inessential representations or essential presences” (Elam, 1994, p.35).
Elam shows that proposing women as historical and representational presences, makes woman the function of ‘truth’, which it is the task of deconstruction to question. Connecting the question of writing a differential history of women to postmodernism, Elam says that it can be written only in the ‘future anterior’ or ‘posterior-anterior’ i.e. the post-modern, so that making any positivity or essential presence emerge out of women can be problematized. This is why, Diane Elam says, “Feminism should not be about establishing the true nature of sexual or gender difference, nor about abolishing it. Rather, the focus should be on keeping sexual difference—understood as the complex interplay of sex and gender roles—open as the space of a radical uncertainty” (Elam, 1994, p.54-55). It is because of this absolutely necessary focus on sexual difference as a radical uncertainty, that deconstruction and feminism converge. However, the import of deconstruction for feminism does not stop at differentiation alone.

3.3.3 Deconstruction and Feminism: of Gynesis

The differentiation of the category of ‘woman’ under deconstruction makes possible another connection between feminist and postmodernist thought, that of what Alice Jardine calls ‘gynesis’, or the generation of the differential of woman, as represented in the readings and writings of male writers, like Lacan, Derrida, Deleuze, Blanchot, etc. ‘Gynesis’, for Jardine, is a process of rethinking of philosophy in the light of the collapse of the master narratives of the West, like Man, Truth and History. In illustrating her point, Jardine shows how Derrida employs terms such as “hymen” and “the invaginated text” in his analysis. She says further:

‘She’ may be found in Lacan’s pronouncements on desire [...] Deleuze’s work on becoming woman; Jean-François Lyotard’s calls for a feminine analytic reaction; Jean Baudrillard’s work on seduction; Foucault’s on madness; Goux’s on the new femininity; Barthes’s in general; [...] ‘She’ is created from the close explorations of semantic chains whose elements have changed textual as well as conceptual positions, at least in terms of valorization: from time to space, the same to other, paranoia to hysteria, city to labyrinth, mastery to nonmastery, truth to fiction.


Jardine argues that the “complex destructuring, disintegration, of the founding structures in the west”, under the postmodern, gives rise to a “new language”, which is “not attributable to Man”, but belongs rather to the “Other, without history—the feminine” (Jardine, 1985, p.72-73). It is keeping in view this gynesis within postmodernity, that Jardine feels that deconstructive postmodern thought can be appropriated to great use by feminist practice.
One can see that not only postmodernism in general, but deconstruction in particular, can offer feminism the means to re-orient some of its own essential positions and generate itself into an effective radical subversive movement of resistance. As it has been argued above, this can happen in two ways: one by visualizing, with the help of deconstruction, how the ‘woman’ can be seen as a *ms. en abyme*, an infinitely differential category; the other by cultivating, in deconstructive practice, the breakdown of normative masculinist forms of reading and writing and the setting up of ‘gynesis’ in its place.

**Check Your Progress:**

*Name the writers associated with each of the following terms and explain each term in your own words:*

i) ‘mise en abyme’:

ii) ‘gynesis’:
3.3.4 Problematizing Gendered Subjectivity

It is clear from what has been discussed so far that it is not possible to conceive of women as an essential common category, because such a position, far from liberating women, entrenches them further into the problematic of non-differentiation. Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson show how since the 1980s, erstwhile essentialist feminist theory has been suitably problematized with insights from the discourses of class, race and sexual orientation to differentiate the category of woman.

One can see that the “version of Sisterhood,” as bell hooks points out, “was informed by racist and classist assumptions about white womanhood, that the white ‘lady’ (that is to say bourgeois woman) should be protected from all that might upset or discomfort her” (hooks, 1984, p.46); (See section 3.3.6). Similarly, Norma Alarcón, a Chicana Feminist, shows how dominant Anglo-American feminism leaves the non-white woman out of its ambit and thus becomes an extended, if inverted version of white masculinism. Alarcón shows how this insistence in white feminism on the unity of gender shuts up the possibility of a really resistant politics. It is from this perspective that Alarcón finds the volume edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), containing writings by ‘radical women of color’, particularly inspiring in its attempt to seek the multiplicities of being a woman beyond the dominant white experience. Besides this seminal work, Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), not only introduces the important concept of mestizaje, i.e. a state of being beyond the binary, and the tool of the ‘new mestiza’, which can go beyond the binary conception of western thought. Moreover, it also explores the question of identity. In her work, Anzaldúa challenges the conception of the border as a simple divide and problematizes the notion of the border, in all its extended meanings.

3.3.5 Postmodernism and Black Culture

In showing how postmodernism becomes especially helpful for voicing one’s dissent against racism in a way that foregrounds difference, Henry Giroux says, “I want to argue for a postmodern discourse of resistance as a basis for developing a cultural politics and anti-racist pedagogy as part of a larger theory of difference and democratic struggle” (Giroux, 1991, p. 221). Giroux shows how postmodernism rejects the distinction between life and art and, within art, between high and low forms, thereby leading to the possibility of extending politics to spheres of everyday life and to sites of day-to-day oppression and contestation. Giroux mentions in this regard how postmodernism dethrones the master-narratives and thus foregrounds in their place the little narratives of popular and minority culture. This is how Giroux shows how postmodernism enables an anti-racist political practice,
which we will take up in the next section. Since anti-racism in different parts of the world has a long history, it will be practically impossible to present an account of the same here. However, the point to be underscored here is that notwithstanding the anti-racist discourse, postmodernism does offer the possibility of forging an enabling politics for anti-racism and anti-normative politics, just as it aids the project of feminism. Postmodernism's incredulity towards metanarratives and positing an alter-locus of micro politics does open possibilities for forging an anti-racist discourse from within postmodernism.

Let us examine this further in the next section, with a discussion of the work of the African-American feminist writers, bell hooks, about whom you have already read in the unit on “Race & Ethnicity” in the previous block (Block 3, Unit 1).

### 3.3.6 Postmodernism, Black Culture and bell hooks

As you have already seen, the connection between black culture, postmodernism and resistance to racism has been theorized well by bell hooks. She says, “As a discursive practice it is dominated primarily by the voices of white male intellectuals and/or academic elites who speak to and about one another with coded familiarity. Reading and studying their writing to understand postmodernism in its multiple manifestations, I appreciate it but feel little inclination to ally myself with the academic hierarchy and exclusivity pervasive in the movement today” (hooks, 1990, p. 24). Having said this, hooks wishes, however, that a radical postmodernist practice should take into consideration, through its privileging of a politics of difference, the voices of marginalized black culture.

However, for bell hooks, one of the problems with postmodernism is that it problematizes the category of identity. She says, “The postmodern critique of “identity”, though relevant for renewed black liberation struggle, is often posed in ways that are problematic. Given a pervasive politic of white supremacy which seeks to prevent the formation of a radical black subjectivity, we cannot cavalierly dismiss a concern with identity politics. Any critic exploring the radical potential of postmodernism as it relates to racial difference and racial domination would need to consider the implications of a critique of identity for oppressed groups. Many of us are struggling to find new strategies of resistance” (hooks, 1990, p.26).

Though she is critical of the postmodern critique of identity, she also shows how this happens exactly at the moment when the marginal has started to get some voice. She states, “It never surprises me when black folks respond to the critique of essentialism, especially when it denies the validity of identity politics by saying, ‘Yeah, it’s easy to give up identity, when you got
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one.’ Should we not be suspicious of postmodern critiques of the ‘subject’ when they surface at a historical moment when many subjugated people feel themselves coming to voice for the first time?” (hooks, 1990, p.28).

However, she also thinks that postmodernism can aid a resistant identity politics in making one think beyond the essentialisms one usually associates one’s identity with. She says, “We have too long had imposed upon us from both the outside and the inside a narrow, constricting notion of blackness. Postmodern critiques of essentialism which challenge notions of universality and static overdetermined identity within mass culture and mass consciousness can open up new possibilities for the construction of self and the assertion of agency” (hooks, 1990, p.28). Therefore, bell hooks feels that a contemporary African-American resistance has to be rooted in a problematization of authentic identity, and that it should never fall into the trap of projecting blackness as an alternate subjectivity. Hooks explains that many refuse to critique essentialist identity for fear of losing touch with the specifics of black experience, but her argument is that a refusal of essences does not take away from one the specificities of the category of experience.

Thus, while hooks agrees with the general contention that black intellectuals are marginal to the postmodern discourse, instead of seeing it as an eventuality, she foresees a possibility to undo this. She says, “The way we work and what we do can determine whether or not what we produce will be meaningful to a wider audience, one that includes all classes of black people” (hooks, 1990, p.30). What hooks suggests is that the possibilities of postmodernism can only be manifest in real critical practice if they are not restricted to the ivory tower of intellectuals, but disseminated within the underclass, because postmodernism, at bottom, promises to erase such boundaries.

Check Your Progress:

In the space provided below, list the aspects of postmodernism that,

i) bell hooks critiques:
3.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have traced a genealogy of significant points of convergence and divergence between postmodernism and feminism. An attempt was made to look at the duplicitous relationship between postmodernism and feminism through the works of Linda Nicholson and Nancy Frazer, Jane Flax and Linda Hutcheon and the significant debates were charted. This unit also looked at the relationship between deconstruction and feminism and positing of postmodern feminism. It also at some length went on to examine the two concepts of ‘ms. en abyme’ (‘woman in infinite deferral’) and ‘gynesis’ as instances of postmodern feminism. Further, we explored the critique of subjectivity by focusing on gender and race. To do so, it looked at the works of Norma Alarcon, Henry Giroux and finally went on to trace the debated in the writings of bell hooks.

3.5 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) What are the points of convergence and divergence between postmodernism and feminism?

2) Is the relationship between postmodernism and feminism essentially enabling? Give reasons for your argument.

3) Explain the origin and concept of ‘ms. en abyme’. How does it forge a relationship between deconstruction and gender?

4) How does the tool of ‘gynesis’ serve as a postmodern feminist tool?

5) Does bell hooks find postmodernism enabling for her feminist praxis? Argue.
3.6 REFERENCES


3.7 SUGGESTED READINGS


