Do women and men write differently? Does sexual identity influence the way someone writes? In this unit, we will explore the notion of writing and difference in the context of postmodernism. To do so, we will examine the writings of some well known women writers, and briefly look at the work of one gay male poet. Some of these writers are overtly feminist while...
Inscribing the Subject others, who may not be self claimed feminist writers, nevertheless address fundamental women's issues in their work. We will also try to see how the writings of these authors are different from their male/ heteronormative counterparts and what exactly constitutes that difference.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, you will be able to:

• Explain what is meant by ‘difference’;
• Analyze what constitutes that difference;
• Distinguish the notion of ‘difference’ in the works of postmodern writers from a variety of backgrounds;
• Discuss how cultural differences impact the stories of the novels; and
• Explore how ‘difference’ is manifested in postmodern fiction.

3.3 WRITING DIFFERENCE

As you may have already realized from your reading of various earlier units of this course, ‘postmodern’ is a broad based term which covers a range of varying movements in literature and the arts. However, to understand the full implications and origins of postmodernism it is important to go back in history and examine the socio-cultural and literary contexts that accounted for its growth. In this final unit of the course, it will be useful for us to review the meaning and significance of postmodernism before we proceed further.

Postmodernism was preceded by Modernism which covers a time period extending from the last few decades of the 19th century and goes on to the beginnings of the 20th century. Basically it was a rebellion against the established practices in the creations of art and writing because these were perceived to be out of synchrony with the collapsing value systems of the times. The occurrence of World War I was instrumental in destroying a world secure in traditional ways of thought. The old values could no longer explain satisfactorily much of what was happening in the new world. The dichotomy between the stark realities of life and the world of art made the world of art seems inadequate and superficial. As a response to this, a number of new manifestations geared towards authenticity of experience appeared in both art and literature. Fundamentally these manifestations were embodied in subjective realities, whether it was impressionism in painting or the stream of consciousness technique of writing in literature. Running parallel to this expressions of one's individual perception of reality, there was also the creation of the anti-hero, or the creation of the anti
novel. This was again a response to the collapsing world around the artist and her/his effort to engage with that world by creating characters with un-heroic characteristics such as someone lacking in confidence or having low self-esteem.

**What is Postmodernism?**

Postmodernism is a broad spectrum term that is used in a wide variety of contexts ranging from literature to art to philosophy. Essentially it refers to feelings of disillusionment, angst, anger, and loss of hope and the certainty of the existence of a bleak and dismal world. These feelings are manifested in attitudes which in turn are evident in artistic creations or writings or paintings. In literature a whole generation, namely the post World War-II generation, found themselves floundering in a world where old values, heroism, and similar virtues became not only irrelevant, but almost redundant. Thus, postmodernism became an umbrella term covering a wide range of subjects of which feminism was one. Although the important contributions of feminism to postmodernism, for example, feminism’s critique of some of the fundamental concepts of Modernism like the construction of knowledge, ethical and aesthetic systems, and the resulting paradigmatic shifts have not been either fully acknowledged or even analysed, nevertheless Feminism remains a vital component of Postmodernism and feminist literature comes under this rubric.

In our earlier discussions of Hélène Cixous’ writing, we learnt about the meaning and significance of the terms ‘écriture féminine’ and ‘écrire le corps’ (‘feminine writing’ and ‘writing the body’. In the following books, we will find that Cixous's exhortation to women to write themselves into history and out of their bodies is implemented. All the stories contain an element of a gradual feminist awakening. Sometimes this awakening, the awareness of the self comes at the end of life as in Mahasweta Devi’s “The Breast Giver” (1997). At other times, as in Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) it comes with the blossoming of womanhood. Marguerite Duras, Marilyn French and the Argentinean writers pick women of varying age groups but the central theme of these writings is the growth of consciousness and the movement towards autonomy manifested in culturally specific situations. Even gay writing is in consonance with this assertion of the self and the determination to articulate and voice one’s experiences. Chosen from across the world, these stories are a testimony of the pervasiveness of patriarchal structures of power, their roles in the disempowerment of women and the ‘othering’ of women everywhere in different geographical, historical and cultural locales.
Check Your Progress:

i) What is the difference between Modernism and Postmodernism?

ii) Why is postmodernism described as an “umbrella term”?

iii) How is Postmodernism related to, but distinct from, Modernism?

iv) Why did the writers of the post World War-Il experience a sense of angst?

v) How can feminist writing be included in Postmodernism?
3.4  **HÉLÈNE CIXOUS**

We will begin with a discussion of well-known French writer Hélène Cixous. Before we look closely at one of her most cited articles, “The Laugh of the Medusa”, let us familiarize ourselves with this author’s life and works.

### 3.4.1  Background

Born of Jewish parents in Algeria in 1937, Cixous studied English literature in which she did her post graduation as well as her doctorate. Though she writes novels, poems, plays as well as short stories, she is best known as a feminist literary critic. She founded the first Centre for Women’s Studies in Europe in the University of Paris-VIII. She is currently Professor at Cornell University, USA. In the domain of feminist discourse, Cixous along with two other French women theorists, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray form a triad considered to be the architects of post-structuralist feminist theory and vastly influential in their impact on both modern discourse and the writings of women. Cixous is a pioneer who advocates the liberation of women from the patriarchal confines within which they are enslaved through the medium of writing. The existing language, she claims, is not tailored to cater to women or to articulate their viewpoints and feelings. The female body and the female mind has been entrapped and enslaved by the bonds of patriarchy which is pervasive and is manifested in language just as it is manifested in social, cultural political and economic structures. Therefore, Cixous makes the radical suggestion that women have to write in a special way for freedom and full expression. This way disregards the usual signifiers of language and is more fluid and semiotic. Through this writing which she names *écriture feminine*, or women’s writing, she asserts, women will be enabled to express themselves better. One of Cixous’ most famous essays is entitled “Le Rire de la Méduse” or “The Laugh of the Medusa”. Let us look at some of the ideas offered by her in this essay.

### 3.4.2  “The Laugh of the Medusa”

“The Laugh of the Medusa” is a famous essay that Cixous wrote in French in 1975. It was translated into English the next year. The ancient Greek myth of Medusa makes her out to be a monstrous, evil and ugly woman, malicious and threatening in her intent. But Cixous claims that in fact Medusa is beautiful. It is a question of how one looks at her. The essay is full of literary allusions and references and not easily comprehensible to the lay person, but it instantly captured the attention of the academic community where it was hotly discussed and contested. With time it has gained a haloed status and is mandatory reading for anyone studying feminist criticism. In it Cixous claims that language itself is linguistically biased and has over the centuries, manipulated certain derogatory perceptions into the
minds of women. These perceptions have been so deeply internalized by
women themselves, that they are alienated from their own bodies, their
sexuality and from themselves.

Not only is language masculine, but knowledge systems too are similarly
structured. Hence it is impossible to articulate women’s desires/feelings/
thoughts through it. Therefore, there is the need for a different kind of
writing, a writing through which women will write themselves out of the
prison in which they have been all these years. Cixous does concede that
it is difficult to define precisely how this difference is constituted. She says
“It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an
impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized,
enclosed , coded-which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist. But it will
always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system; it
does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophic-
theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are
breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever
subjugate” (Cixous, 1976, p. 883). Cixous goes on to explain how this
continuous belittling of women by controlling men is not going stop or alter
by itself. The change will have to be wrought by women themselves and a
powerful tool for this would be the subversion of language and its modification
and alteration in unique and untraditional ways. She is confident that this
kind of writing will yield dramatic results. “I shall speak about women’s
writing: about what it will do. Woman must write herself; must write about
women and bring women to writing from which they have been driven away
as violently as from their bodies- for the same reasons, by the same law,
with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text- as into the
world and into history- by her own movement” (Cixous, 1976, p. 875) gives
the example of the world of publishing where all the control lies in the
hands of men and they decide what has to be published and what can be
dismissed. The nexus between editors, publishers and owners of publishing
houses ensure that only certain kinds of writing be allowed to see the light
of day. Thus, asserts Cixous, from the beginning, men have controlled and
manipulated women and if women want to free themselves and gain a
status in the structures, both academic and social, then the way to do so
is through writing. This impassioned message to all women has made an
enormous impact on the writing and discourse of feminism in contemporary
times.
Check Your Progress:

i) Why does Cixous feel that women need to write in a way different from men?

ii) What can be achieved by the subversion of language?

iii) How does Cixous suggest women subvert writing and the existing lexicon?

iv) How does Cixous describe ‘écriture féminine’?
3.5 MAHASWETA DEVI

From France, let us shift our attention to India. You may have already heard about the famous writer and activist, Mahasweta Devi, who has written primarily in Bengali. Let us learn more about her life and contributions.

3.5.1 Background

Mahasweta Devi was born in 1926 in Dhaka but the family moved to India after Partition. She was brought up in a family where there was an environment of social awareness and an appreciation of the arts and literature. Both her parents were writers and the famous film maker Ritwick Ghatak, her uncle. There were others members of the family equally renowned in the creative arts and writing. She studied at Vishwabharti and Calcutta University doing her post-graduation in English Literature. She married the well known playwright and actor Bijon Bhattacharya, who she later divorced. She has a son, Naburan Bhattacharya, who is also a writer like his mother. One of the most widely read writers of contemporary India, Devi writes novels, biography, essays and short stories and has been honoured with the most prestigious awards of the country including the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Padma Shri, the Jnanpith Award, and the Padma Vibhushan among several others. The central theme in Mahasweta’s work is the issue of the marginalization and exploitation of the Tribal and adivasi people of India. In her stories, she talks about the appropriation of their lands, the destruction of their culture, the Government’s apathy to their problems and the continued sexual exploitation of their women. She has made sustained efforts over the years to try and bring justice to them through her writings and is seen as one of their most powerful advocate. She also addresses the dynamics of gender in the relationships of men and women speaking about the commodification and exploitation of women, often depicting the complicity of women in their own subjugation. Thus she focuses in her writings not only on women per se but on the dispossessed and the marginalised sections of society. She touches upon subjects as various as child marriage, the veneration of wifehood and motherhood, poverty, colonization, illiteracy and the manipulation of religion by men in the reinforcement of patriarchy. Her writing is uncompromising, stark in its depiction of the realities of our times. “The Breast Giver” is about an urban woman but the theme is of women’s exploitation and demonstrates the “interdependence of patriarchal ideology and capitalism, a system that reduces both sexes, but particularly women to objects of exploitation” (Greene & Kahn 1985, p.15).
3.5.2 “The Breast Giver”

“The Breast Giver” is a story taken from a volume entitled *The Breast Stories* (1997) which contains three stories, with the breasts of a woman being the central motif. It has been translated into English by Gayatri Spivak. The central theme of the volume is the commodification of the body of woman and the different ways in which this commodification is manifested. The narrative style is matter of fact and the stories are powerful in their impact. Briefly, this particular story is about a woman named Jasodhara, wife of a poor Brahmin, Kangalicharan who works for a wealthy feudal Bengali land owning family by the name of Haldars. In a driving accident, the younger son of the family runs over the legs of Kangali, crippling and disabling him from earning a livelihood. Fortunately for him, the father of the boy, in an attempt to assuage his own guilt at having been the indirect cause of trouble to a Brahmin, assures Kangali that his family would be looked after. But some time later the master also dies and his wife, the mistress, refuses to send food for Kangali’s family. In dire straits, Jasodha goes to the Halder family to ask for work. There the mistress of the house offers her the job of a wet nurse since her own daughters-in-law are reluctant to nurse their babies for fear of ruining their figures. Thus, Jasodha becomes a wet nurse to five children, two of her own and three of the Haldar family. More in the spirit of fattening a cow for its milk, as long as she has milk in her breasts she is venerated and looked after. Her status in her own family as well as in the Haldar family becomes elevated. Sexual activity with her husband and good food ensure that Jasodha is lactating continuously. She herself is satisfied with the arrangement, proud of her ample breasts and content in the fact that as a dutiful wife and mother she is fulfilling her responsibilities. Naturally this state of affairs cannot continue. The children grow up and Jasodha is no longer required. The mistress of the house also dies and the younger women refuse to support her. Her husband finds a place for himself in the nearby Kali temple and her children abandon her. She gets breast cancer because of the continuous and prolonged nursing she has done “mothering” so many sons. She dies a painful and agonizing death, alone and deserted.

“The Breast Giver” is a richly multilayered and multifaceted narrative that can be read from a feminist and/or postcolonial perspective. It is a story of the internalization of a patriarchal value-system that deprives Jasodha of her selfhood which she mistakenly thinks is constituted by her using her body to support her family. The ability to sacrifice herself for her family is accorded very high status in the list of all the things that a good wife must do. In fact, motherhood itself is validation enough and a woman need not seek any other. Even the name of the protagonist -Jasodha - is an ironic jab at the popular myth of Krishna and his mother, also called Jasodha,
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about whose love for her son, songs and stories are legend. In the Krishna story, motherhood is celebrated and venerated. In Devi’s story, Jasodha dies a horrible death after having spent a lifetime nursing so many sons. It is only when she is dying that she becomes emotionally conflicted and comprehends in hindsight how she has been the victim of the intersection of patriarchal values and poverty, how everyone has only used her and that she has been complicit in that exploitation. Thus, she has been enslaved by her own perception of what a “good” wife should be.

It is impossible to imagine a story like this one having been written by a man. The commodification of the woman’s body, the depiction of tradition being a server of patriarchy and the internalization of these values by women, the demystification of that symbol of sexuality - the breasts of a woman, and finally the toll that the role of motherhood takes have been powerfully portrayed in “The Breast Giver.” Although the story can be viewed in the larger frame of social attitudes and practices, nevertheless it is a story which in Devi’s hands is a scathing indictment of patriarchy.

Activity:

Read the short story, “Breast Giver” and answer the following questions:

i) What do you think Mahasweta Devi is trying to depict in this story?

ii) Tradition is often used in the exploitation of women. How does “The Breast Giver” demonstrate this?

iii) What do you think of Jasodha’s husband? How far is he a stereotypical character?
iv) What evidence of caste and class divisions do you see in this story?

v) What are the central themes of Mahasweta’s work?

3.6 MARILYN FRENCH

The American writer Marilyn French provides us with an excellent example of the struggles and achievements of a woman writer, who overcomes difficult circumstances to emerge as a feminist voice to be reckoned with. Let us learn more about her life in the upcoming section.

3.6.1 Background

Marilyn French, an American born in 1929 married young and soon had two children. She put aside her own schooling to work and put her husband through Law School. However, later when she wanted to study he refused to support her. They were divorced in 1967 and it was only after that, that French returned to Harvard and completed her education getting her Ph.D in 1972. She was able to become what she had always wanted to be, a teacher in a college. She has written several novels and the three volumes history of women called From Eve to Dawn: a History of Women in Three
Volumes (2002) The 1960s and 70s were significant years vis-a-vis three important books that were published during the period. These were Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique in 1963, Germaine Greer’s The Female Eunuch in 1970 and Kate Millet’s Sexual Politics in 1970. These had been preceded by the seminal work of Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex published in 1950. These books had had a huge impact on women of that time. Of the three books, Friedan’s book seems to have touched a raw nerve in an entire generation of white middle-class educated women who were expected to remain content in the domestic world of their homes and families. French who had put her own career in the backseat had worked to put her husband through Law school was not an exception. Hundreds of women had done the same. But many had later discovered, French included, that when the time came for the same husbands to return the favour, they were unwilling to do so. Such women felt trapped and betrayed and a lot of resentment was generated though this could not be articulated since it was simply not the thing for women to do. These situations were vividly depicted in French’s novel The Women’s Room and hundreds of women identified with it since it articulated precisely the inchoate feelings in their hearts and gave a name to what Friedan had famously referred to in the introductory chapter of her pathbreaking book The Feminine Mystique (1963). Friedan entitled the first chapter “The Problem That Has No Name” (1963, p. 15). The novel articulated the silent voices of the women of a certain class and background and had a profound effect on the lives of the women who read it. It is considered one of the first distinctly feminist novels to have been written during the period and is placed high on the list of significant women’s novels to have been written at that point in time.

3.6.2 The Women’s Room

The Women’s Room by Marilyn French came out in 1977 and is considered one of the seminal books of its time for the feminist movement. The plot of the novel hinges on the growth and self awareness of a woman, Mira Ward, who gets married at an early age, puts her personal dreams into cold storage, has children, and works hard to make the American dream of being a perfect housewife with a perfect house come true. She has other women friends, women like herself, married to busy men who have no time for their families. After some time, Mira and her husband move to a new place where she makes new friends. These women are supportive of each other and help each other through domestic and personal crises. The women are expected to be happy and satisfied with the worlds of their homes and children. But overarching all their activities is the feeling of emptiness and loneliness, a deep sense of angst. They find the monotony of the never-ending cycle of housework stifling. Mira finds herself doing the routine chores of a house every day and feels enslaved. The house becomes a space
of female entrapment. After a long marriage, her husband files for a divorce and remarries. Suddenly the ground beneath Mira’s feet disappears. Even though her marriage was boring and monotonous, it afforded her security. In an already empty life, now Mira is bereft even of that. She finds it difficult to cope with the vacuum of her life and ponders suicide. But at this point, her friend, Martha saves her by giving her support and encouragement. Slowly, painfully, but finally, Mira is able to pick up the pieces of her shattered world and build it up again. For the first time in her life she can put her own desires first and she does this by fulfilling a long cherished dream, that of going to school and becoming a teacher. She joins Harvard. Here she makes new and stimulating friends. Among them are Val, a radical feminist, Isolde and Kyla and Clarissa. These are aware, articulate women. The feminist movement is taking roots and there is a heady atmosphere in which women are beginning to articulate feelings long since suppressed. Among her friends there is also a man named Ben, a diplomat with whom Mira is able to develop a satisfying relationship. But this relationship is ended by her when she realizes that Ben expects her to go with him to Africa and have a family. Mira has already travelled down that road and even though Ben is a different kind of man, she is not willing to put her life on hold again, not even for a man for whom she has begun to care. During the course of her friendship with her women friends there is an ugly incident that takes place when Val’s eighteen year old daughter gets raped. Val is bitter in her comments and makes a statement which became notorious and was quoted widely. Val says “Whatever they may be in public life, whatever their relationships with men, in their relationships with women, all men are rapists, and that is all they are. They rape us with their eyes, their laws and their codes” (French, 1977, 5, sec. 19.1). Later Val gets shot at another trial of a rape victim. At the conclusion of the novel, the protagonist is shown as beginning to write a novel, a novel that will narrate the stories that Mira and her friends have lived.

There are several aspects of the story of the novel that are resonant of the author’s own life. Her early marriage to a dominating and self centred man, her taking up a job to put her husband through his education, the birth of her two children, the rape of her teenage daughter, her divorce and decision to complete her education, the support that is extended to her by a group of feminist friends some of whom undergo their own crises, how through that support she is able to build up her confidence and then her life and pursue a career in teaching, something she had wanted to do even when she got married. All these facts are echoed in the life of the protagonist of the *Women’s Room*. However, French claimed that this was not an autobiographical novel. It was simply one that had been able to put a finger on the pulse of a generation.
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Check Your Progress:

i) Compare and contrast the concept of a ‘good wife and mother’ in “The Breast Giver” and The Women’s Room.

ii) How do you account for the popularity of French’s novel at the time of its publication?

iii) What is missing in Mira’s life that prevents her from being happy?

iv) What role do Mira’s friends play in her life?

v) What was the price that most women paid for being ‘good wives’ in French’s times?
3.7 ARGENTINEAN WOMEN WRITERS

Contemporary women writers from Argentina have taken on the task of giving voice, in their writings, to their more unfortunate sisters. They speak for those women in their country, and there are a substantial number, who are uneducated, sans power and unable to articulate their oppressions. In the subsequent sections, we will learn more about Argentine women writers and look closely at some short stories by representative writers.

3.7.1 Background

Although Argentina is among the more developed of the South American Countries, it has, as its historical inheritance, a legacy of women’s exploitation which is deeply embedded in its social structures. The practices and values attached to that legacy continue to operate even in contemporary times. The suppression of women cuts across barriers of class and their exploitation operates at the levels of the physical, the mental and the emotional. In fact, there are many similarities between the conditions existing among the poor peasants of our country and Argentina. The feudal system and the counterpart of the zamindar, the gaucho who demands subservience and exploits not just the women, but all those who work for him is a scenario all too common in rural Indian. Political development has taken place but it has been uneven and women are not major players in the field. Thus, there is much in the history of the women in Argentina that has yet to find expression. In this context, the short stories in the collection *The Web* are especially significant.

3.7.2 The Web

*The Web* (1983) is a volume of short stories by Argentinean women. The central theme of the stories is the subjugation and exploitation of women. The writers attempt to counter masculine oppressions by addressing these themes in different ways and using diverse narrative styles. These range from direct narration, the use of magical realism, and reference to classical myths and legends, to the use of allegory, metaphors and symbols. An imaginative and innovative use of the current trends in Argentinean literary practices, including elements of postmodernism, and ‘croillismo’ (the use of rootedness with the land combined with magical realism and elements of the fantastic) make these writings rich and multilayered.

“The Clearing” by Luisa Levinson is a story about a prostitute who is imprisoned by a man and brought into a jungle. Motifs of webs and nets recur in the story and are suggestive of the entrapment of the woman in a situation and place from where escape is difficult. Her growing hatred for this man pushes her to murder him and then escape into the jungle, where she knows that her chances of survival are slim. But there is nowhere else
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to go. It is significant that the choice that the woman makes is one where precedence is given to her personal freedom even if the price to pay might be death. “Takeover” by Beatrice Guido is about how six women appropriate the very place where they have been reduced to non-entities. An element of magical realism pervades the story as the six women connive to become pregnant by the patriarch, Don Marcelo, the owner of the Estate and thereby ensure a stake in the estate as mothers of children who will inherit his property. A completely confounded Marcelo is at a loss about what he can or should do. There is a note of irony in the contrast of the many sons who are born and the complaints earlier of the father about having so many daughters and no son. This short narrative effectively uses the tool of magical realism to drive home the point that in a world where women are sans power, subversion and subterfuge are the answers.

The next two writers, Martin Lynch and Silvina Bullrich, locate their narratives in more confined spaces. “Latin Lover” by Martin Lynch is a story about a woman who is put up in quarters situated close to the place where her lover stays with his wife. This humiliating arrangement is a testimony to patriarchy which bestows power to the man over both wife and mistress. However, the transitory nature of their association is reflected in the type of living arrangements he makes for her. Whereas the wife has a proper residence, the mistress is put up in a kind of camp home. But as the realization of the oppressive and lop-sided nature of their equation dawns on her, the psychological hold he has on her lessons, enabling her to leave him. “Lover” by Silvina Bullrich, in contrast, is a narrative of a similar arrangement but from the point of view of the wife. It is the classic story of the neglected wife, materially well provided, but emotionally frustrated, lonely and unfulfilled. In a desperate effort to bring meaning to her life, she takes on a lover, but the liaison is unsuccessful for the man is unable to give her the kind of emotional support she wants and he abandons her. “Change of Guard” by Luisa Valenzuela is again about an imprisoned woman, Laura, sexually abused by a man and his friends. The story is in the form of an allegory and the writer has used magic realism to convey the havoc that is wrought on Laura’s mind. The man tries to break her will by creating a sense of confusion in her mind about reality and fiction. He installs multiple mirrors in her room so that she is reflected to herself in a series of fragmented selves. But finally Laura is able to find coherence through the very mirrors which are being used to overwhelm her. She saves herself and destroys the man responsible for her imprisonment.

Thus the central theme of The Web is the domination of man over woman and the multiple ways and levels of its manifestations. The prison and the web are central symbols in the volume representing the manifold prisons that exist for women, the home being simply one of them. The web also represents the criss-crossing and dovetailing of social structures that enmesh
women ensuring their subservience. The dynamics of power played out in the different stories emphasize how physical confinement and abuse is just one aspect of the domination which frequently operates at the psychological and mental levels as well. However, if the protagonist in “Lover” contemplates ending her life, the women in “Change of Guard”, “Latin Lover” and “Takeover” are able to survive through subversion and strategy. ‘Feminine’ spaces like kitchens, patios and other domestic spaces are often used as areas of confinement and restriction and serve as symbols of the confined lives that the women live. This is in contrast to the writings of some black women who celebrate the space of the kitchen especially as ‘woman’s place’ and use it for female bonding.

**Check Your Progress:**

i) Name some of the writers and short stories of *The Web.*

ii) Why is this collection of stories especially significant?

iii) What is the reason behind the wife’s depression in the story entitled “Lover”?

iv) Why did the writers of *The Web* feel the need to articulate the experiences of the less educated among them?

v) What is the kind of traditional social structure that is prevalent in Argentina and how are women placed in it?
You have been introduced to African and African-American writers in other courses, as well as in this course. Amongst well known contemporary women writers, a voice we cannot ignore is that of a writer from Nigeria, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Let us begin by reading about her life and works.

3.8.1 Background

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie born in 1977 is a young Nigerian woman writer who has made an impressive debut in the literary world with her first novel *The Purple Hibiscus*. The novel was published in 2003 and received very positive reviews. The work has won the applause of both critics and readers bringing for the novelist several prestigious awards. Adichie comes from a well educated family with both her parents teaching in the University. After her schooling, she moved to America for higher education studying in prestigious Universities such as John Hopkins and Yale. Recipient of several awards, she is a meticulous craftswoman who weaves her story with diverse strands creating a cohesive whole. She has also written another novel and a volume of short stories. Her work is rooted in her homeland and she writes with passion about the traditions, the corruptions, and the social structures of the land as well as of the dreams of its inhabitants.

3.8.2 *The Purple Hibiscus*

*The Purple Hibiscus* begins with the words “things started to fall apart at home...” resonant of the famous 1958 novel by Chinua Achebe *Things Fall Apart*. Essentially it is the story of a young Nigerian girls’ journey to maturity in a family overshadowed by a domineering and rigid father. The family is a small one comprising of father, Eugene, mother, Beatrice, a seventeen years old son, Jaja and fifteen years old daughter Kambili. It is set against the backdrop of a nation beset by both political turmoil and economic instability and narrated in the words of the young Kambili. By traditional standards Eugene is a good person, generous and upright, but he is also a religious fanatic and rigid in his attitudes. Although he is a good provider, he is tyrannical in his interactions with the rest of the family members, physically and psychologically abusive and completely dominating over his wife, son and daughter. So cowed down are they that Kambili doesn’t know what her laughter sounds like. His children find it difficult to accept his violent ways. When they go to visit their aunt Ifeoma, Eugene’s sister and a professor in the University, they get a glimpse into a world they never imagined existed. There is laughter and freedom to speak and respect for the opinions of others. There they come out of their shells and grow in confidence. When Eugene’s brutality with his wife results in her having a miscarriage, she decides that she would take his abuse no longer and begins...
to slowly poison his food. In time Eugene dies and Jaja, her son, takes the blame for the murder and spends three years behind bars. In the meantime their Aunt decides to go to America along with her family after she has been unfairly accused and turned out from her job as a teacher in the University of Nigeria. By this time the three years are going to be over. Kambili’s brother is soon to be released from jail having served his time there protecting his mother. Beatrice herself very slowly begins to show some signs of recovery from the long years of physical and mental torture she has undergone, and Kambili develops into a young confident woman.

Within this simple plot Adichie manages to put enough soul to be able to get her readers to remain engaged with the text. The emotional tumult in Kambili caused by her father’s actions is parallel to the tumult taking place in the country. The resplendent natural beauty of Nigeria forms a backdrop for the political and social upheavals caused by a military coup and the conflict between the existing social patterns and the imported Western culture. The feminist position is represented by the characters and actions of the three important women in the story - Kambili’s mother, Beatrice, her Aunt Ifeona and Kambili herself. Beatrice resorts to subterfuge to fight her husband because she does not have the power or the means to do it openly. Ifeona, on the other hand, stands for autonomy and selfhood. She is a contrast to her brother Eugene, in her flexibility and open-mindedness and her character underscores her brother’s rigid, inflexible attitudes. Finally in the three years, which is the time that the novel spans, the young Kambili grows in understanding from the shy inhibited person overshadowed by the overpowering presence of her father to a more confident person.

**Check Your Progress:**

1) **What are the different kinds of feminism portrayed in the novel?**
ii) How do the elements of postcolonialism intersect with postmodernism in the novel?

iii) Why does it take so long for Beatrice to stop her husband’s abuse?

iv) What effect does the visit to their aunt’s house have on Kambili and her brother?
In Section 3.4 of this Unit, we looked at the work of the French writer Hélène Cixous. In this section, we turn to the work of another equally well-known writer, Marguerite Duras. After reading about her life, we will examine her work *The Malady of Death* more closely in the subsequent section.

### 3.9.1 Background

**Marguerite Duras** was born in Vietnam to French parents and spent the early years of her life in Vietnam. After the early death of her father, her mother decided to stay on in Vietnam and bring up Marguerite and her two siblings. Money was in short supply and the children grew up in trying circumstances. While still a teenager, Duras left for France where she completed her education, studying Political Science and Law. She joined the French Communist party and worked for the French Resistance during the Second World War. She published her first novel at that time in the year 1943. A versatile writer, who wrote fiction, plays, film scripts and essays. In 1984 she won the prestigious Goncourt prize for her novel *The Lover* which is supposedly based on her life and in which she portrays her relationship with a Chinese man. She directed both films and plays and gave numerous interviews often making controversial remarks that got her wide publicity. She was associated with the Noveau Roman movement in French Literature in which traditional narratives techniques were challenged and experimented with the subtexts and implications contained in language. Her novella, *The Malady of Death* (1982), is marked by a pervasive touch of sobriety and is a statement on the futility of romantic relations between women and men. Duras battled with alcoholism while she was writing the novel and had to seek professional help to deal with the problem.

### 3.9.2 *The Malady of Death*

*The Malady of Death* by Marguerite Duras is a short novel about a man who pays money to a woman to spend some weeks with him so that he can know what love is and what loving a woman means. The cliché ‘you can’t buy love with money’ is turned on its head in the man’s attempt to do just that. Although the woman tells him that love is not a commodity that can be purchased and indeed, it is not even within one’s power whom one ends up loving, he still wants to try. The man is paying for an intimacy which is not buyable, a fact he does not comprehend. The confidence of the man in the nexus between money and power resonates with the structures of patriarchy and the routine commodification of women. The demand for payment by the woman increases in direct proportion to the level of intimacy desired by the man. The woman is willing to pretend, but the pretence will not come cheap. What is notable is the ability of the woman to allow the
man a physical intimacy without giving emotionally of herself at all. As ‘other’ she tries to earn the maximum amount of money from the man’s sense of vacuum and insecurity remaining inaccessible to him at the core level. Thus Duras subverts the idea of romantic love and emphasizes the inevitability of failure in the relationships between the two sexes. The concept of the “Other,” so fundamental to feminist thought is dramatically underscored by Duras by her not giving the woman even a name. She remains throughout the story, a nameless ‘other’, paid by a man who is trying to attempt/address his personal ambivalences and insecurities. Duras’ forte is her consummate use of language and her construction of dialogue which is spare and clipped.

**Check Your Progress:**

i) How does Duras subvert the concept of love?

ii) Why do you think Duras does not give her woman character a name?

iii) Do you think that the portrait of the woman in the novel is a prototype of the traditional woman?

iv) Why do you think it is so difficult for the man to understand that money cannot buy love?

v) What is the main theme of The Malady of Death?
For our final study, we return back to an Indian author of high repute, whose works have been influential in shaping literary discourse about gender and sexuality in India today. Let us learn more about Hoshang Merchant in the next section.

3.10.1 Background

Hoshang Merchant is one of the best known and most important gay writers of India. Professor of Poetry in the Department of English, University of Hyderabad, Merchant was born and got his early education in Mumbai. He then studied in America and has a doctorate degree from Purdue for his work on Anais Nin. This work was later published by Writers Workshop as a volume entitled *In-discrétions*. He is widely travelled and has taught in places as diverse as Heidelberg, Iran and Jerusalem. Merchant claims that travelling charges him through its exposure to a fascinating variety of experiences. In fact, Merchant has published substantially, and besides his autobiography entitled *The Man Who Would Be Queen* (2011), has more than twenty books of poetry to his credit some of them being, *Flower to Flame* (1989), *Love’s Permission* (1969), and *Bellagio Blues* (2004). He edited the popular *Yaraana: Gay Writing from India* (1999), a collection of poems and short stories. He is one of the most outspoken and articulate poets in the country on the subject of homosexuality, which he says is also another social construct albeit one that is often in the closet or marginalized. Homosexuality, like heterosexuality, is not monolithic and should not be treated as such. He has studied Buddhism in Dharamshala with the Dalai Lama as well as Sufism in Iran and Palestine. Hoshang Merchant has addressed issues like homophobia, the questions of sexual identity and the courage required to come out of the ‘closet’ rather than lead a “normal” life. In an interview published in *The Hindu* (2010) magazine he has said that Dalits are similar to gays because both are “gender-Dalits”. The poet hopes that someday there will be a properly developed Indian Gay Theory which is currently in its nascent stage.

3.10.2 Queer Literature

A subject considered taboo at one time, same sex relationships are being written and spoken about much more openly these days instead of remaining a subtext in literary writings as they were just a few years ago. “Queer” is an umbrella term that covers a wide range of sexual minorities—homosexual, bisexual as well as transgendered people. As social- sexual ‘others’ or ‘outsiders’, these groups experience the ‘othering’ process in all its hostility. Queer literature generally includes gay experiences and the experiences of persons of a variety of sexual orientations and posits that dominant or “permissible” practices of being intimate are socially constructed
and intolerant of different/other sexual orientations. The 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of Queer Theory which interrogates the gendered nature of sexuality, ideas of what is 'natural' and 'unnatural' and challenges the deeply embedded sexual norms of society. As you have previously learnt (MWG 001, Block 3), critics such as Judith Butler and Adrianne Rich have problematized heterosexuality stressing its restrictive nature. The affinity that feminist literature has for gay literature is defined by the suppressions and the prejudices that both have to face, although feminist literature has carved a niche for itself in the past few decades and is now flourishing. With the legalization of homosexuality in July 2009, many gay people openly declared their sexual orientations and several cities like Mumbai, Bhubaneshwar, Bangalore, Kolkata and Delhi witnessed gay parades. Well known persons like Vikram Seth and Amartya Sen, along with many others, have also canvassed for the removal of the laws against homosexuality in India and have contributed substantially in its social acceptance. More books with homosexual themes are now being published in India, some of which include Mayur Patel’s Vivek and I (2011), R.Raja Rao’s Hostel Room 131 (2010) and The Boyfriend (2003), Rahul Mehta’s Quarantine (2011) and Ghalib Shiraz Dhall’s The Exiles (2011).

Check Your Progress:

i) What is Queer Theory?

ii) What are the links between feminist and gay literature?
3.11 LET US SUM UP

The literature being written by women, in Nina Auerbach’s words, “aims to transfuse an oppressive world into its own myth-making substance, creating spaces large enough to fit our dreams of invasion” (Auerbach, 1987, p.159). She talks about a writing that will be able to create an ideology “that is durable, able to demystify, diminish and finally engorge the power that subordinated us....” (Auerbach, 1987, p. 159).

The writers of the novels/shortstories discussed in this unit have a similar agenda. In their hands these subjugations and the efforts to resist them find eloquent expression. Starting with Cixous who questions the sexist nature of language itself and exhorts women to write, subvert and claim ownership of language, we move to Mahasweta Devi who portrays a woman misguided and complicit in her own exploitation. Duras interrogates the question of the commodification of love and French, Adichie, and the Writers from Argentina examine patriarchal structures that confine and constraint women and interrogate the lop-sided relationships between men and women. Hoshang Merchant represents gay literature which also attempts to articulate hitherto suppressed feelings and experiences. He writes about the courage that is required to do so and describes the hostility that has to be faced. It is important to note that the books are bound by certain core concerns and themes. All of them hinge on women’s need and attempts at self-awareness and self actualization. In their efforts to achieve these, women face hostility, resistance, violence and betrayal. The diversity of the novels/short stories is notably rich. The writings are from Asia, Europe, Africa and America and belong to different cultural, political, temporal, geographical and historical frameworks. The wide range of the selected novels serves to reinforce the pervasive nature of women’s subjugation and exploitation. However, using postmodern strategies of subversion, difference, rupture and resistance, these writers succeed in forging pathways leading away from gendered and sexual oppression.

3.12 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Read the essay and list the techniques that Hélène Cixous suggests to women to subvert writing and the existing lexicon.

2) Read the short story by Mahasweta Devi discussed in this unit and discuss the elements of postmodernism in it.

3) Tradition is often used in the exploitation of women. How does “The Breast Giver” demonstrate this?

4) Discuss the concept of a “good wife and mother” in “The Breast Giver” and The Women’s Room.”
5) What is the kind of traditional social structure that is prevalent in Argentina and how are women placed in it? Discuss with the help of examples from some of the stories from The Web.
6) Discuss the links between gay literature and feminism, with the help of suitable examples.

3.13 REFERENCES


3.14 SUGGESTED READINGS


