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Block

1

Introducing Postmodernism

Unit-1

Semiotics and Structuralist Theory

07

Unit-2

Reading Gender with/in Structuralism

21

Unit-3

Semiotics and the Visual: Mediations

42

Block 1: Introduction Postmodernism

In this introductory block of the course, we begin with discussions of literary and linguistic theories which have influenced and shaped the discourse of postmodernism. For a better understanding of the theories discussed here, you are encouraged to review some of the relevant units from earlier courses, which are mentioned within each unit.

The block begins with an introduction to semiotics and structuralist theory, with special attention to the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Levi Strauss, Julia Kristeva, Umberto Eco and Jacques Lacan. You would be familiar with some of these names already, from your earlier readings, and some may be new.

The first unit delineates some of the links between linguistics, structural anthropology and literature, to show how these may be relevant from the perspective of gender. The second unit re-visits Luce Irigaray's reformulation of Freud's and Lacan's psychoanalytic theories, as well as Gayle Rubin's influential conceptualization of the sex/gender system. It also discusses the delineation of a feminist narratology from the perspective of Susan Lanser. Overall, this unit is aimed at helping you build an understanding of the ways in which structuralism has impacted the theorization of gender. Feminist critiques of structuralism are woven into the discussions so that the interface between structuralist theory and feminist interrogation of this theory becomes apparent to the reader. The third unit, "Semiotics and the Visual", builds on your understanding of semiotics provided to you in the first two units. It constructs bridges between semiotics and visual culture through the medium of advertisements so that you can understand the latter as a system of signs. You will also learn how these signs are related to issues of gender, power and representation in our society through a semiotic analysis of cultural products.

At the end of this block, you should have obtained a good understanding of some of the basic theoretical constructs which are the foundation blocks of postmodernism. You will also begin to see how gender is an operative category in all of these ideas.

UNIT 1 SEMIOTICS AND STRUCTURALIST THEORY

- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Learning Outcomes
- 1.3 Basic Concepts of Semiotics and Structuralism
- 1.4 Contribution of Ferdinand de Saussure
- 1.5 Claude Levi-Strauss and Structural Anthropology
- 1.6 From Jacques Lacan to Julia Kristeva
- 1.7 Basic Concepts of Umberto Eco
- 1.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.9 Glossary
- 1.10 Unit End Questions
- 1.11 References
- 1.12 Suggested Readings

1.1 INTRODUCTION

We have seen previously how feminist theories have made a significant contribution towards creating a more aware reader capable of viewing both literary texts and society through a gendered perspective (see MWG 101, Block 5, Unit 18 ‘Feminism and Psychoanalysis’ and MWG 103, Block 1, Unit 4 ‘Feminism and Deconstruction’). Now we will try to assess the contribution of semiotics and structuralism in assessing the interaction between language, literature and social phenomena. It will also be important to keep in mind that both semiotics and structuralism can be seen as precursor of postmodernist / poststructuralist literary theory. The beginning of the postmodernist period can be traced to the counter-cultural upheavals and new political formations of 1967 and 1968. Students and universities were at the forefront of both developments and there was a gradual transformation from the structuralist approach of viewing the society as a totally predetermined domain. It was around the same time that postmodernist literature developed. Like modernism it continued to challenge established habits of thought, but the challenges were now much more radical. Unlike the modernist writers, whose goal it was to reinvigorate perception and language, postmodernist writers questioned the very nature of perception and language. However, to understand the phenomenon of postmodernism, it is important to understand the manner in which semiotics and structuralism led to it.

1.2 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After going through this unit, you will learn about:

- The main ideas of semiotics and structuralism.
- The relevance of semiotics and structuralism in the field of literary theory.

- An overview of the contributions made by Ferdinand de Saussure, Levi Strauss, Julia Kristeva, Umberto Eco, and Jacques Lacan in the fields of semiotics and structuralism.
- The possibilities of semiotics and structuralism in opening new modes of exploration in gender studies.

1.3 BASIC CONCEPTS OF SEMIOTICS AND STRUCTURALISM

You have already been introduced to some basic aspects of semiotics and structuralism in the unit on ‘Feminism and Deconstruction’ (MWG 103, Block 1, Unit 4). (It may be helpful for you to review this unit before reading further.) Semiotics can broadly be defined as a branch of communication theory which analyzes the various modes of representation and systems of signs employed by human beings to transmit thoughts, feelings, ideas and ideologies. It is used in analyzing a wide range of disciplines like anthropology, sociology, art, literature and mass media. Whether used as a means of representing phenomena or interpreting it, a semiotic analysis is of great value in postmodern situations where interactions with manufactured reality constantly challenge our sense of normalcy.

Modern semiotic studies stemmed from two major branches: one was the European tradition developing from ideas presented by the Swiss-French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the other emerging from ideas forwarded by Charles Sanders Peirce. Saussure tried to explain in *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) that all elements of language should be seen as components of a larger system of language in use. The formal discipline of “semiology” emerged out of this. Peirce, on the other hand, was interested in analyzing the manner in which humans extract meaning from different categories of signs. Both Saussure and Peirce can be seen as trying to understand the complicated relationship between physical signs, the objects they referred to, and their human interpreter.

The “classical” tradition of semiotics has in its fold great structuralist scholars from the second half of the twentieth century like Claude Levi- Strauss, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Umberto Eco, A. J. Greimas, Juti Lotman, Thomas A. Sebeok, Noam Chomsky, Michel Foucault etc. Almost all of them were clearly indebted to the ideas put forward by Saussure and Peirce in formulating their thought. Today semiotics can be said to have entered its poststructuralist phase – with the writings of the likes of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and many others – and is considered one of the favoured method and philosophy of the postmodern era. It is difficult to estimate the path that semiotics will take in the future but it will probably not be erroneous to claim that it will continue to wield significant influence on human perception in a rapidly changing world.

In MWG 103, Block 1, Unit 4 Feminism and Deconstruction, you have already been exposed to the basic ideas of structuralism. In this section we will once again try to understand the basic ideas associated with structuralism and also try to see how semiotics and structural theory were interacting with each other.

Structuralism

Structuralism as a literary movement developed in Paris of the 1950s and 1960s though many of the prominent names associated with the movement, like the Bulgarian Todorov and the Lithuanian Greimas, were not French by birth. The movement can be seen as a reaction against Sartre's version of Existentialism, which also developed in Paris. Another factor that influenced structuralism was the growing force of the social or human sciences. Modernism had tried to keep social sciences at a distance but with the 1950s and 1960s, when the influence of Modernism had waned and Postmodernism was yet to emerge as a major force, Structural linguistics of Saussure and Structural Anthropology of Levi-Strauss ushered a new kind of critical thinking. The Structuralist linguists, like the Semioticians, were neither interested in promoting any particular literary movement nor in vouching for the importance of literature, but in explaining a text only in terms of language and its system of conventions. The focus in Structural linguistics, therefore, is the phono / lexico / grammatical constituents of any literary work and the differences between linguistic signs that create meaning. Structuralism, per se, can be seen as a way of assessing and analyzing the world, or the literary text, predominantly based on the perception and description of structures. At a very basic level, structuralism espouses the view that no element in any system has any significance by itself and its full significance can only be perceived when it is integrated into the structure of which it is a part. Structuralists also believe that no human activity is either "natural" or "essential" but constructed and hence the system in which this activity is performed is crucial in formulating its meaning. If one goes by this formulation, any activity ranging from the actions within a narrative to action in real life occurs within a system of differences and hence has meaning only within that system. Meaning, therefore, emanates neither from nature or the divine but from the structure of the system itself. This is quite similar to the nuances of semiology which proposes that diverse human action and productions convey "shared" meanings to people belonging to a particular culture, and hence can be studied as signs which function in different kinds of signifying systems. Structuralism and linguistics are very similar critical tools that aim to study literary or social sign systems.

Structuralist Approaches

Structuralist approaches to literature challenged some of the conventional beliefs of the ordinary reader. It was long felt that the essential source of a literary work was the author and a text was the mode through which a reader entered into a communion with an author's thoughts and feelings. Another assumption often made by readers is that a book tells us the truth about human life. However, Structuralists put forward the idea that the author is "dead" and that a literary discourse does not need to have any truth-function. In a 1968 essay, Roland Barthes argued that writers only have power to mix, reassemble and redeploy already existing writings (Barthes, 1968).

Structuralists always want to find the codes that according to them hold the text's meaning. Bressler argues that the manner in which "a text convenes meaning rather than what meaning is conveyed is at the centre of their interpretative methodology" (Bressler, 2007, p.110). Bressler illustrates his point through a typical structuralist analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown". While most readers of the story would equate the darkness

of the story with evil, the structuralist would be particularly interested in “how (not that) darkness comes to represent evil” (Bressler, 2007, p.110). To a structuralist, all texts are part of a common system where certain things come to acquire a particular connotation e.g. darkness=evil in this case. The shared system entails that meaning is “intertextual” and cannot be reached by studying a single text in isolation.

Check Your Progress:

i) What is semiotics?

ii) What were the two branches from which modern semiotic studies developed?

iii) What are the basic ideas of structuralism?

1.4 CONTRIBUTION OF FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE

Ferdinand de Saussure’s book *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) has been a great influence on semiotics and structuralism. As you have seen in the earlier unit on “Feminism & Deconstruction” (MWG 103), Saussure makes a fundamental distinction between “langue” and “parole”. The former is the shared system which the speaker unconsciously draws upon while the latter is the realization of it in individual utterance. This distinction is crucial to all structuralist theories as structuralism is interested in the system which forms the base of any human signifying practice, and not in the individual utterance. This essentially means that when a structuralist studies specific poems or myths or economic practices, she or he is interested not in the individual work but in the system of rules being employed to construct it.

Introducing Postmodernism

As argued by Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson and Peter Brooker, Saussure did not look upon language as a collection of words collected over a period of time to refer to different things. He opined that words were not symbols with corresponding referents, but “signs” comprised of two inseparable parts called the “signifier” and “signified”. The signifier is the sensory pattern and the “signified” is the concept elicited in the mind by the signifier. For instance, the word “tree” is a sign which consists of two parts – the signifier, or the word itself, and the signified, or the concept of the tree conjured up by the signifier. The distinction is important because Saussure contended that the relation between signifier and signified is based on convention and not natural resemblance. Returning to the above example of the tree, we could say that the signifier “tree” is linked to its signified only through convention, and not because the word “tree” has any natural link to the semantic concept that it

refers to. This relational nature of language does away with the idea that a word / symbol corresponds to an outside object / referent. Pre-Saussurean view may be represented as thus:

Box 1.1

SYMBOL = THING

Saussure's model on the other hand is as follows:

$$SIGN = \frac{\textit{signifier}}{\textit{Signified}}$$

Selden, Widdowson and Brooker use the example of traffic lights to prove their point. The colour red in such a system signifies “stop” although there is no natural relation between red and stop. In such a view, the sign has a meaning only within a system and can only be understood within a commonly accepted system.

Saussure draws a clear distinction between the system of a language (la langue) and particular instances of speech and writing (parole). The job of “linguistics is to reconstruct the underlying system (or grammar) of a language that makes possible the speech events of parole” (Culler, 2000, p.60). According to Saussure, the linguist’s objective should be to examine signs within a self contained system and hence her/his focus should not be on “diachronic” (changing over time) aspects of language but rather on “synchronic” aspects (language as it exists at a particular moment of time in a specific community of people). The synchronic system can be evaluated in terms of two axes: the “paradigmatic” and the “syntagmatic.” The paradigmatic focuses on the “fixed” value of signs based on their immediate associations with other signs while syntagmatic is concerned with the

“dynamic” meaning brought about by the order or sequence of signs. Although both are required in a structural analysis, the paradigmatic continues to be structuralism’s primary concern on the virtue of being systematisable.

Check Your Progress:

- i) Explain how Saussure introduces the idea of the sign being made of the signifier and signified.

- ii) According to Saussure, what should be primary concerns of a structuralist? Do you agree with him? If so why, if not why not?

1.5 CLAUDE LEVI-STRAUSS AND STRUCTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Claude Levi-Strauss implemented Saussure’s linguistic principles to narrative discourse in the 1950s and 1960s. He believed that since language is the overwhelmingly distinctive feature of human relations, it harboured within both

the prototype of cultural phenomena and also the means by which each form of social behaviour is established and perpetuated. The central point raised by his study was not only whether different aspects of social life could be studied using Saussure's linguistic model but also whether the innermost nature of these aspects was very similar to that of language. He argued that the meaning behind divergent practices and activities like food preparation and serving rituals, religious rites, games, various texts, myths, etc. can be studied by analyzing the structure that produces them. He analyzed these cultural phenomena to understand the patterns or structures underlying them. According to him, behind individual culture there exist common natural or universal properties. He wanted to focus on the patterns or structures that lie beneath the customs and beliefs of different cultures.

In *Structural Anthropology* (first published in 1958) he writes, "like phonemes, kinship terms are elements of meaning; like phonemes, they acquire meaning only if they are integrated into systems" (Strauss, 1972, p.34). Therefore, individual constituents of cultural behavior, like say the cuisine of a particular community "may be analysed into constituent elements, which in this case we might call 'gustemes', and which may be organized according to certain structures of opposition and correlation" (Strauss, 1972, p. 86). Each system like kinship, food, marriage ritual etc. is only a partial manifestation of a total culture, conceived finally as a single huge language. Furthermore, if it can be possible to prove that the systems / structures were common to several spheres, it would not be wrong to conclude that one has arrived at a significant "knowledge of the unconscious attitudes of the society or societies under consideration" (Strauss, 1972, p.87).

A basic understanding of his study of myths would illustrate the fundamental aspects of Levi-Strauss's arguments. He opines that myths possess a structure quite similar to language and accordingly can be studied as a system. In his study, individual myths were treated as parole and he tried to arrive at the myth's langue, or structure that enabled it to function and have a meaning. In "Structural Study of Myths" (1955), Levi-Strauss argues that myths from different cultures seem similar as they all exist within a shared structure. This would essentially justify the recurrent and similar themes in myths from different cultures. The basic structure of myths, which he calls "mythemes", is very similar to the "phonemes" in language. Like phonemes, mythemes function in and through a shared system within the mythic structure. The rules that decide the manner in which the mythemes may combine forms the structure or grammar of myths. Levi-Strauss argues that human beings possess an innate ability to grasp the structure behind myths. This is because very much like language, myths are just another way by which we classify and organize our world. Of course it might be wrong to treat myth simply as language as there are some differences. However, Saussure's ideas about langue and parole can easily be employed to indicate that individual versions of each myth (its parole) derive from and add to the fundamental structure of its langue e.g. "Sophocles' Oedipus Rex derives, as parole, from the langue of the total Oedipus myth" (Hawkes, 2009, p.28).

There is another dimension to the whole argument as it needs to be remembered that a myth is always simultaneously located in time (as in talking about events that happened at a distant past) and also timeless (as it invariably presents a trans-cultural, trans-historical explanation of the world). Therefore, in each of its presentation, it combines both langue and parole, and in doing so transcends

both. The effect of this can be seen on the language of myth: while poetry is likely to lose part of its charm in translation, the “mythical value” of a myth is always transmitted even in a very poor quality translation. Myths have this ability because their unique position accords to them some kind of a super-language, which is always successful in emitting a fundamental message. Levi-Strauss here seems to be indicating a kind of interaction “between synchronic and diachronic dimensions, and between langue and parole that the telling of, say, the Oedipus myth will always generate: the sense, that is, that we are always in the presence of a totally realizable potential; something that is more than a story being told here and now” (Hawkes, 2009, pp. 30-31).

Check Your Progress:

Do you think there is any similarity between the ideas of Saussure and Levi-Strauss? What does Levi-Strauss say about myths? What are “mythemes”? How does a myth combine both langue and parole?

1.6 FROM JACQUES LACAN TO JULIA KRISTEVA

In Feminism and Psychoanalysis (MWG 101), you have already been exposed to the works and ideas of Jacques Lacan. We have also discussed the work of Julia Kristeva in various units in the first year curriculum (see MWG 101, MWG 103). Therefore, in this unit we will primarily use Lacan as an entry point into the ideas of Kristeva in the context of our focus on semiotics and structuralism. Like Freud, Lacan argued that the conscious behaviour of human beings is greatly affected by the unconscious. However, unlike Freud, who viewed the unconscious as a chaotic site of dark passions and suppressed wishes, Lacan famously stated in his essay that “the unconscious is structured like language” (Lacan, 1957, p.103). Hence, he argued that the elaborately and intricately structured human psyche could be analysed in a systematic manner much in the way structuralism studied the underlying structure of a language.

Lacan

Lacan was mostly in agreement with the various stages of infantile sexuality that were presented by Freud. However, he also extended these stages and illustrated the link between psychoanalysis and discourse. In Freudian theory, at a pre-mirror stage the infant does not conceive of itself as a separate individual from its mother and exists in a world of “plentitude”. Lacan terms this feeling of plentitude the “imaginary” as it is a product of the imagined sense of “fullness” or plentitude that the child feels because of its relationship with the mother. It is only at the mirror stage that a child develops a separate sense of self by identifying with a reflected image in the mirror. However, since the image is only a reflection and not itself, the conception of the self is never stable.

Lacan further argued that it was language that ultimately structured our conscious and unconscious mind, eventually shaping our identity. The dominant role of language becomes clear in the part it plays in the development of the human psyche which Lacan calls the “symbolic order”. It is at this stage that we learn language, which in turn starts to mould our psyche. Lacan argues that the ability to separate the male from female, while according a superior status to the former,

is a process that is initiated in the symbolic order. The differentiating between the two genders is based on difference and loss. The child starts to recognize not only the dominant status of the “Father” in dispensing cultural norms and laws, but also identifies him as the enforcer who wields the threat of “castration” for anyone deviating from social decrees. It needs to be remembered that since the “castration complex” is very different for the two sexes, the process of completing the symbolic order is crucially different for each sex.

It is in the symbolic order that the child starts to formulate his/her socially ordained gender identity on the basis of pre-determined cultural roles. “Both sexes come to understand their own sexuality by observing what they are not, a boy noting that he does not do the things a girl does and vice versa” (Bressler, 2007, p.154). The boy, as he enters the symbolic order, accepts his father as the law-giver and also the figure that forbids his desire for the mother (a desire known in psychoanalysis as Oedipus complex). The girl child, on the other hand, is made to acknowledge at this stage the superiority of the father figure and assumes for herself a socially subservient position. Integrated into the system of language, she is ordained an inferior status. However, since language itself is a construct, a challenge to it remains a possibility. This challenge has come in various forms of critical writing, and is now studied under the umbrella term of “Gender Studies”.

It is primarily Lacan’s ideas that have bred new critical interest in psychoanalytic theory. In the hands of leading feminist critics like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (*Madwoman in the Attic*, 1979), Julia Kristeva (*Powers of Horror*, 1982; *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 1984), Luce Irigaray (*An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 1993), to name a few, we have seen continuing interaction with theoretical models postulated by both Freud and Lacan. The work of these feminist critics, albeit differently, tries to illustrate the concerns and psychological conflicts faced by female writers in an overwhelmingly patriarchal social setup.

Kristeva

Kristeva critically interacts with ideas forwarded by psychoanalysis, anthropology, philosophy, linguistics, and phenomenology to create her concept of “semanalysis”. Kristeva is keenly interested in the disruption of the patriarchal structure by our instinctive reactions. In her most important work on literary meaning *La révolution du Langage Poétique* (1974), she attempts to illustrate the manner in which the ordered and rationally accepted is constantly being disrupted by the “heterogeneous” and the “irrational”. While Lacan had ignored a “pre-mirror stage” (for an excellent analysis of the arguments put forward by Lacan and their link with gender studies please go back to the unit on Feminism and Psychoanalysis in MWG 101), Kristeva not only formulates the idea of such a stage, but argues that it is at this stage that a “child experiences a lack or separation from the mother that shapes meaning or significance, moving from this lack or need to desire” (Kristeva cited in Bressler, 2007, 159). This leads to the development of an emotional force closely associated with our instincts, a phenomenon she names “semiotic”. It is an area of rhythmic pulsions in active opposition to the “symbolic”, the stable system of language. She

calls these potentially anarchic rhythmic pulsions “chora”, and much like a Freudian slip, it can at any point of time intrude and disrupt the male-oriented discourse. Chora is actually a philosophical term used by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato in his work *Timaeus* to describe a receptacle, a space, or

an interval. It is neither being nor nonbeing but a stage between the two. Julia Kristeva uses the term as part of her analysis of the difference between the semiotic and symbolic realms. The anarchic aspect of chora makes for a kind of dynamism in the signifying process as the semiotic chora is in continuous motion. It can be seen as a kind of “dancing body” (from the Greek “khoreja” meaning dance) that has infinite potential for creating signifying movements. This anarchic site can be seen as “an area of rhythm, colour and play in language” (Mills, 1995, p.49).

Kristeva gives us a complex psychological account of the relationship between the “normal” and the “poetic”. The theory of resistance put forward by Kristeva, and which is hinted through the word “revolution” in her seminal 1974 book, is not merely metaphorical. According to her, the possibility of radical social change is embedded in the disruption of authoritarian discourses. By focusing on the poetic language employed by Stephane Mallarme and Comte de Lautreamont, she illustrates the manner in which poetic language brings in subversive openness within a closed symbolic order. The avant-garde poet, irrespective of his/her gender, constantly resists the symbolic discourse by tapping into the disruptive energy of the semiotic. Mallarme, for instance, through subverting syntactical laws, subverts the Name-of-the-Father, and bonds with the Body-of-the-Mother by recovering the “maternal” semiotic flux. In literature, whenever there is a point of contact between the symbolic and the semiotic, the latter enters into the former, resulting into linguistic ‘play’ that leads to a ‘jouissance’, or intense pleasure. This ‘rapture’ is close to a ‘rupture’ and Kristeva envisages this poetic revolution to be closely linked with political revolution in general, but more particularly with feminist liberation. The challenge to established syntactical order by cultivating an anarchism in language is a philosophical and political stance, particularly of French feminism, which is used to challenge the dominance of phallogocentrism. At times she thinks that modernist poetry actually hints at a coming social revolution that will become possible once the society evolves into a more complex form. However, at other times there can also be felt in her writing a fear that bourgeois ideology will simply engulf this poetic potential and treat it as a safety valve for the repressed impulses it denies in society.

Kristeva opines that the use of the semiotic in literature has revolutionary potential to “the extent that any activity [that] resists the symbolic ... is revolutionary” (Kristeva, 1981, p.165). Thus, like Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, she believes that although language itself is patriarchal, significant resistance to phallic dominance always remains a possibility within it. Kristeva

argues that women should employ a double discourse which must always be fluid and be both inside and outside the boundaries of the Symbolic. Although Kristeva herself rejects the term “feminist,” she does indeed argue that since women “do not have a proper place within the symbolic, they have a special relation with the semiotic. Thus, although she rejects *écriture féminine*, women, for her, still have a privileged access to the semiotic, and are more likely to exploit this in writing” (Mills, 1995, pp. 49-50). Like Cixous, Kristeva emphasizes the work of avant-garde artists who work in an unconscious space outside conventional, patriarchal structure. For Kristeva, these artists through their close bonding with the semiotic represent, in their work, the free unmastered ingredient of the human subject which constantly challenges the boundaries of conventional meanings.

Check Your Progress:

- i) What are the basic ideas given by Lacan regarding the development of the human subject? What new direction does he give to the ideas of Sigmund Freud?

- ii) Explain how Kristeva argues about the possibility of revolution in language. Do you agree with her? Why or why not?

1.7 BASIC CONCEPTS OF UMBERTO ECO

Umberto Eco's well-known work, *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976) rejects both the theory that it is the objects (things or events) that determine the meaning of signals or signs, and the notion that "iconic" signs must mirror their objects. Much like Saussure's ideas of *langue*, Eco argues that the proper approach to formulating a unified semiotic theory would be to assess the means by which signs can function as signs, and the manner in which they are produced and interpreted. He distinguishes between "signification" and "communication"; arguing that while the former is a semiotic event by which a sign "stands for" something, the latter is primarily concerned with transmission of information. Such a transmission is only possible within a given code or system of signification, without which signs and their content cannot be correlated. Eco argues that a theory of sign-production should contain not only a theory of communication but also a theory of "mentions" and a theory of communicational acts. The theory of communication will explain the manner in which information is transmitted; the theory of mentions will focus on the manner in which signs may be used for naming things; while the theory of communicational acts will deal with the means by which a sender may transmit messages (both verbal and non verbal) to the addressee.

In Structural Linguistics Saussure had argued that a sign had two inseparable parts, the signifier and the signified. Eco views the sign as a unit which consists of an expression and content that are related to each other by mutual correlation or "sign function". The expression and content of a sign are always interdependent. Moreover, since the meaning of a sign is always culturally defined, the same sign may mean different things in different cultures. He also argues that even within the same culture signs may be interpreted differently under different conditions as they hold a "fuzzy" status. This is especially true for literary texts.

In *A Theory of Semiotics* Eco provides a list of a wide range of subjects, including literary texts, which can be studied in semiotics. Kristeva had argued that the language of poetry disrupts the symbolic order with its deliberate subversion of accepted rules. Much in the same fashion Eco goes on to argue that the semiotic analysis of any aesthetic work must be aware of the disruptive potential of creative language. It is sometimes deliberately ambiguous, mixing

within its various rules or codes of communication. Art becomes a site where “messages” are connected in order to produce “texts” in which “rule-breaking” is fostered and organized. The result of this is the creation of a “special language” unique to art that constantly transforms “its denotations into new connotations” (Hawkes, 2009, p.116).

The decentring of language has led to the production of a significant body of playful, self-reflexive, and self-parodying fiction. Eco’s own fictional works can be seen as a deliberate attempt to destabilise fixed categories. His famous novel, *The Name of the Rose* (1980) “is at once an example of the interpenetration of previously separated categories of fiction and non-fiction, and vertiginously historical: a detective thriller which mixes gothic suspense with chronicle and scholarship, intersects the medieval with the modern, and has a Chinese box-like structure, to produce self-reflexively comic mystery about the suppression and recuperation of the ‘carnavalesque’ power of the comic itself” (Selden & Widdowson, 1993, p.178).

Main Ideas of Eco

Let us now attempt to briefly encapsulate the main ideas of Umberto Eco. Based on our discussion above, we can summarize that Eco:

- Emphasizes the means by which signs can function as signs, and the manner in which they are produced and interpreted;
- Distinguishes between “signification” and “communication”;
- Argues that since the meaning of a sign is always culturally defined, the same sign may mean different things in different cultures; and
- Concludes that the semiotic analysis of any aesthetic work must be aware of the disruptive potential of creative language.

1.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have seen how semiotics and structuralism have tried to grapple with the manner in which meaning is produced in society, and especially in literature. In order to do this we have looked at the arguments developed by Saussure, Levi-Strauss, Lacan, Kristeva and Eco. You have also seen how the development of semiotic and structural thought ultimately ushered in the postmodern era. The rudiments of the disruptive elements of language and literature, that form the core of any postmodern and/or poststructuralist reading, can be traced back to the ideas of the prominent theoreticians dealt with in this unit. Finally, you have learnt about the manner in which semiotics and structuralism have been used to raise issues increasingly pertinent to gender studies. In the next unit, we will re-visit the relationship between gender and structuralism in much greater detail.

1.9 GLOSSARY

Diachronic : A form of linguistic study which traces the changes in a language over a long period.

Introducing Postmodernism

- Langue** : The linguistic term used by Ferdinand de Saussure to refer to the rules that comprise a language or the structure of the language. The focus of a linguist should be a study of langue not parole.
- Parole** : A linguistic term used by Ferdinand de Saussure to refer to individual speech utterances. Although an individual can generate innumerable examples of parole, they will all be governed by the language's structure, the langue.
- Semanalysis** : A new science developed by Julia Kristeva which argues that during the pre-mirror stage of development because of a lack that a child experiences due to separation from the mother, there slowly develops a desire to bond with the disruptive emotional impulses that run counter to the symbolic order.
- Semiology** : The new science proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure, which studies the process by which meaning is created through signs and codes in all our social behavioral systems.
- Sémiotique/Semiotic** : A term coined by Julia Kristeva to refer to the emotional force that is tied to our instincts and resides in the prosody of language rather than symbols.
- Semiotics** : Founded by Charles Sanders Peirce, it borrows Saussure's linguistic methods and applies them to all meaningful cultural phenomena.
- Sign** : A term used in linguistics by Ferdinand de Saussure to define a word. Saussure argued that words were not symbols with corresponding referents, but signs comprised of two inseparable parts called the signifier and signified. The "signifier" is the sensory pattern and the "signified" is the concept elicited in the mind by the signifier.
- Structuralism**: An approach to literary analysis that used the technique of linguistics to understand the process by which meaning is generated and understood not only in literary works but in all forms of communication and social behaviour.

1.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Describe in your own words, the crucial aspects of semiotics and structuralism.
- 2) Assess the importance of Ferdinand de Saussure in the development of Structural linguistics.
- 3) Explain the ideas given by Claude Levi-Strauss regarding the structural study of myths.

- 4) Explain the manner in which Julia Kristeva uses Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory to indicate the manner in which the semiotic can pose a challenge to the patriarchal symbolic order.
- 5) Explain in your own words why Umberto Eco accords a special status to the language of art / literature.

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UNIT 2 READING GENDER WITH/IN STRUCTURALISM

Structure

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Learning Outcomes
- 2.3 Luce Irigaray: Labial Economy
- 2.4 Gayle Rubin: Sex/Gender System
- 2.5 Susan Lanser: Feminist Narratology
- 2.6 Implications of Feminist Readings
- 2.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.8 Unit End Questions
- 2.9 References
- 2.10 Suggested Readings

2.1 INTRODUCTION

You have already been briefly introduced to structuralism in different units, especially in the previous unit. Before you begin reading this unit, you may find it helpful to reread what you have studied earlier about structuralist thinking. In this unit, we will examine how structuralist precepts have been applied, extended, and appropriated to generate fresh perspective on the economies and politics of sexual difference across different disciplines. You are, by now, familiar with some basic concepts associated with the theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Here, we will study, in particular, Luce Irigaray's radical reformulation of the Freudo-Lacanian psychoanalytical symbolic universe in her elaboration of a labial libidinal order. We will also focus on Gayle Rubin's rewriting of Levi Strauss' theories, among others, to flesh out the influential concept of the sex/gender system. Finally, we will look at Susan Lanser's harnessing of structuralist literary critical tenets to forge a feminist narratology. Through the work of these scholars, we will be able to evaluate the impact of structuralism on the theorization of gender.

2.2 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading this unit, you should learn about:

- The different ways in which structuralism has impacted the theorisation of gender.
- Irigaray's specific deployment of "two lips" as a counter to Freudo-Lacanian phallogocentrism.
- The characteristics of Rubin's conceptualisation of the sex/ gender system.
- Lanser's delineation of a feminist narratology.
- The implications of these revisions of structuralist tenets for feminism.

2.3 LUCE IRIGARAY: LABIAL ECONOMY

Known as one of the main theorists of *écriture féminine* along with Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray is a Belgian born French feminist philosopher, psychoanalyst, and cultural commentator. She is especially credited for advancing an “ethics of sexual difference” that is based on the specificity and autonomy of the female/feminine. In this respect, her work can be contrasted against the normative Freud-Lacanian rendering of women and/or femininity as “passive, narcissistic, masochistic and penis-envying” (Eagleton, 2008, p. 140).

Psychoanalysis typically concerns the study of psychic malaise or illness. But, from Freud onwards, the self and subjectivity whose disease it analyses has not been the Cartesian cogito, fully self-conscious, stable and in control. Rather what it has discovered is an ego—in harness, and “driven” by an inscrutable unconscious. That is to say, the conscious self, in psychoanalytical parlance, is constitutively partial, unsettled and out of control. And “desire” is the name given to its compulsive and ceaseless search for self-sufficiency. Or as Freud puts it, “The ego is no longer master of its own house” (as cited in Grosz, 1990, p. 13), and “Where id was, there Ego shall be” (as cited in Simms, 2003, p. 53). Freud, however, reveals the androcentric biases of his theorisation since its salient theme is the anticipatory fear of castration in male psychic development and the accomplished fact of castration and consequent penisneid (penis envy) in female psychic development. Here, it would help you to review what we have already learnt about Freud’s theories of psychosexual development in the unit “Feminism and Psychoanalysis” (see MWG 101, Block 5, Unit 2).

As we have seen earlier, if the discovery of the lack of the penis in the little girl is the critical moment of gendered self-recognition/self-resolution for children in Freud, then, for Lacan, the phallus is the privileged signifier of the Symbolic order of language governed by the Name of the Father. This is because Lacan combines Freudian psychoanalysis with Saussurean linguistics (the contributions of Saussure have been discussed in the previous unit; you may also find it helpful to review the unit “Feminism & Deconstruction”, MWG 003, Block 1, Unit 4). For Lacan the grammar of the unconscious parallels the grammar of language. Thus, “the question of phallocentrism is inseparable from the structure of the sign. The signifier, the phallus, holds out the promise of full presence and power, which, because it is unobtainable, threatens both sexes with the ‘castration complex’” (Selden, Widdowson and Brooker, 2005, p.141).

Lacan, it is true, insists that the penis is not to be confused with the phallus:

In Lacan, the phallus ... is the “missing” signifier to which both sexes must reconcile their relationship. Full entry into the Symbolic does not depend on having or not having a penis, but on the symbolic interpretation a child places on its absence or presence in him/herself and in the two powerful figures of the mother and the father (Kaplan, 1998, pp. 61-62).

Despite Lacan’s insistence on such a distinction, feminist scholars have objected to women’s location as ‘lack’ in Lacanian discourse. For instance, Cora Kaplan observes that “... if we accept the phallus as a privileged signification (a meaning which does relate to something outside itself)... we see that the little girl’s access to the Symbolic, that is to language as the embodiment of cultural law, is always negative, or more neutrally, eccentric” (Kaplan, 1998, p. 62) because

“[i]n order for women to identify finally with their mothers and take their place as female in culture they must accept the missing phallus as a permanent loss in themselves” (Kaplan, 1998, pp. 61-62; emphasis added).

As Jane Gallop says, “the man is ‘castrated’ by not being total, just as the woman is ‘castrated’ by not being a man.” And, “[w]hatever relation of lack man feels, lack of wholeness, lack in/of being, is projected onto woman’s lack of phallus, lack of maleness” (Gallop, 1982, p. 22). In other words, just as man is lacking (vis-à-vis human totality) on account of being sexed male, woman is lacking (vis-à-vis man) on account of being sexed a penis-less female.

How have feminist scholars reacted to such a privileging of the phallus? Here, the notion of ‘scopophilia’ (literally, love of looking) has been used to explain Lacan’s position.

While Lacan nowhere decrees like Freud that “anatomy is destiny,” his explanation for taking the phallus to be the privileged signifier of the Symbolic order belies both his scopophilia (here used more in the sense of Lacan’s privileging of the sense of sight, of that which is readily apparent to the gaze) as also his underlying sexism. In effect, as Christine Battersby notes, for Lacan, “‘Woman’ and the ‘feminine’ are associated with that which is repressed.... Explicitly in Lacan ... ‘woman’ falls outside the horizons of the ‘I,’ and instead stands alongside the object against which the (masculinised) self is constructed as self...” (Battersby, 1998, pp. 87-88).

Obviously female subjectivity charts a wayward track in such Psychoanalytic roadmaps of the ego-self. The feminine, understood as one pole of a binary sex-gender system, can only ever be Other to/than a phallic (phallus-shaped, phallus-formed) identity-ideal. Luce Irigaray (who actually was debarred from attending Lacan’s seminars because she dared to differ with him) offers a powerful critique of this construction in psychoanalytic discourse.

Let us examine Irigaray’s perspective on Lacan’s theory. She believes that “‘penis envy’ must above all be interpreted as a symptomatic index of the pregnancy of the desire for the same, whose guarantee, and transcendental signifier or signified, will be the phallus. The Phallus” (Irigaray, 1997, p. 434). Were this not the case, she asks, “why not also analyze the ‘envy’ for the vagina? Or the uterus? Or the vulva? Etc. The desire felt by each pole of sexual difference ‘to have something like it too’? The resentment at being faulty, lacking with respect to a heterogene, to an other? The ‘disadvantage’ mother nature puts you to by providing only one sex organ?” For that to happen, however, “would require, entail, demand an other sex, a different sex—a sex that shared in the same while remaining different— for sexual pleasure to be possible.” In Freudian psychoanalysis instead, “sexual pleasure boils down to being plus or minus one sex organ: the penis. And sexual ‘otherness’ comes down to ‘not having it’” (Irigaray, 1997, p. 434).

Therefore, Luce Irigaray claims that “woman’s lack of penis and her envy of the penis ensure the function of the negative, serve as representative of the negative, in what could be called a phallic—or phallic— dialectic” (Irigaray, 1997, p. 434). This is reinforced in the Lacanian structuralist rewriting of Freudian tenets. As Simon Patrick Walter (2000) notes, in the Freudian Othering of women (based on their lack of a penis) “Woman finds herself deprived of meaningful articulation. Her relationship to representation

becomes passive, and she must content herself with a mimetic designation as mere mirror, reflecting the activity of male subjectivity” (Walter, 2000, p. 115).

Irigaray offers a counter to the phallogocentric narrative described above. She posits a libidinal economy of flows, but affixes a gender tag to her fluid theorisations. She calls it the feminine economy and pits it against the dominant solitary Freud-Lacanian phallogocentric and “homosexual” economy. As she reiterates, “Female sexuality has always been theorized within masculine parameters. ... For the clitoris is thought of as a little penis ... while the vagina derives its value from the “home” it offers the male penis. ... According to these theorists, women’s erogenous zones are ... a nonsex organ or a masculine sex organ turned inside out in order to caress itself. Women and her pleasure are not mentioned in this conception of the sexual relationship (Irigaray, 1981a, p. 99).

Irigaray aims to shatter this hegemony of an oedipalised male sexuality. She does this by coming up with a strategically positive, alternative conceptualisation of the feminine mode of being. This feminine mode unsettles the tyranny of the same with an economy in which sexual difference is possible. It is to this end that she brilliantly deploys the metaphor of the two “lips” as an iconographic representation of feminine sexuality, of “the sex which is not one.” As she asserts, “woman does not have a sex. She has at least two of them, but they cannot be identified as ones. Indeed she has many more of them than that.” Ergo, “her sexuality, always at least double, is in fact plural. ... [for] woman has sex organs just about everywhere.” Thus, according to Irigaray, “the geography of her pleasure is much more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle than is imagined” (Irigaray, 1981a, pp. 102-03).

For Irigaray, the sign of the two “lips” presents the symbolic possibility for an alternative ethics and politics. In her elliptic, lyrical prose, she contends that “The link uniting or reuniting masculine and feminine must be horizontal and vertical, terrestrial and heavenly” (Irigaray, 2004, p. 17). In addition, Irigaray points to “two sets of lips that ... cross over each other like the arms of the cross, the prototype of the crossroads between. The mouth lips and the genital lips do not point in the same direction” (Irigaray, 2004, pp. 17- 18). Irigaray asserts that the labial economy she is describing provides a paradigm in which a non-oppressive intercourse with the Other is possible; where the alterity of the other can be recognised and respected. Furthermore, she insists that this is a non-acquisitive, non-possessive economy; a generous economy where heterosexual exchange would be characterised by a flowing forth rather than a holding back (Irigaray, 1981b, p. 110).

From the above discussion, we can see how Luce Irigaray’s efforts critique and challenge the phallogocentric psychoanalytical determinations of gendered subjectivities. They also rework the Lacanian structuralist understanding of the unconscious as language to offer a viable alternative symbology, poethics and paradigm where “man and woman may once again or at last live together, meet, and sometimes inhabit the same place” (Irigaray, 2004, p. 17).

Before we move on to the next section, let us try to recapitulate some of the main aspects of Irigaray’s theories, based on our discussion above. Let Us Recap:

Box No. 2.1

- Freudian and Lacanian Psychoanalysis took the male to be the norm and defined female psychic development and/or subjectivity in the light of this androcentric determination.
- Luce Irigaray first identified this bias in their work and then clarified the consequences of such theorisation. She showed how Freudian and Lacanian Psychoanalysis only ever actually studies one sex: the male sex. The female sex, she argues, is only accommodated for the way in which it is not male. In effect, the female sex is defined negatively. Freudian and Lacanian Psychoanalysis, according to Irigaray, is not a fair way to study or understand female sexuality or subjectivity, since it only really focusses on the male sex. Instead of being an account of two different sexualities and subjectivities, of male and female, A and B, conventional Psychoanalysis is, according to Irigaray, a study of one sex (male) and it's negative, of A and A-
- Through her work, Irigaray seeks to correct this imbalance and lacuna of traditional Psychoanalysis. According to Irigaray, female sexuality and feminine subjectivity have a better chance of being autonomously understood when they are looked through a different conceptual lens than the phallic order. She argues, in fact, that female sexuality is better understood through the symbol of two lips that reference the female anatomy.
- Ultimately, Irigaray believes that the labial economy she speaks of offers both men and women a different, non-competitive, non-parasitic, free and joyous way of relating to the self, to the other and, to the world in general.

Check Your Progress:

- i) How does Lacanian psychoanalytical theory reveal Lacan's bias for the location of the male as the norm?

- ii) How does Irigaray attempt to correct this bias?

2.4 GAYLE RUBIN: SEX/GENDER SYSTEM

Gayle S. Rubin is a cultural anthropologist who has not only been hugely influential in providing direction to feminist struggles and inquiry, but she has also been one of the pioneers of LGBTQ+ (or, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and others) studies. One of her earliest contributions to feminist scholarship was to combine Levi Strauss' structuralist studies of kinship relations and cultural phenomena with Lacanian formulations about the unconscious to postulate the operations of the sex/gender system as salient in the multiform cultural, political, psychological and economic oppression of women. You have already been introduced to Gayle Rubin's work in the unit

“Constructing Sexuality” (MWG 101, Block 3, Unit 1). It would be helpful for you, at this point, to review the previous discussion. Here, let us turn to some other aspects of her work.

Deeply impressed with Saussurean linguistics, Levi Strauss believed that “language alone has thus far been studied in a manner which permits it to serve as the object of truly scientific analysis” (1963, p. 58). Moreover, he was also convinced that the structuralist methodology (keep your earlier units on structural linguistics in mind) could be productively applied to study other kinds of social and cultural phenomena: “Although they belong to another order of reality, [Strauss was certain that] kinship phenomena are of the same type as linguistic phenomena” (1963, p. 34). Therefore, he advised that experts should employ a “method analogous in form (if not in content) to the method used in structural linguistics” (1963, p. 34). To quote Strauss, just as we used language without being aware of the general laws that govern linguistic systems, “all forms of social phenomena are substantially of the same nature” (pp. 58-9) and “consist of systems of behaviour that represent the projection, on the level of conscious and socialised thought, of universal laws which regulate the unconscious activities of the mind” (p. 59). Consequently, Strauss set about studying the underlying principles of social organisation.

According to Strauss, kinship relations form the core of any social system. He used a structuralist lens to examine the grammar of kinship formations. Strauss’ radical departure from conventional wisdom was to claim that the most ‘elementary’ kinship units were not families but the relationships between them. In Strauss’ view, the most elementary kinship unit is composed of three basic types of relationships—those of consanguinity (siblings), those of affinity (married couple), and those of descent (parent-child). Furthermore, universally marriage relations between consanguines and parents and their children is prohibited. The incest prohibition thus necessitates the practice of exogamy. Drawing upon Mauss’ theorisation of the importance of the gift in tribal social organisation, Strauss further radically contends that women are the gift par excellence that men exchange between themselves to secure social cohesion and undergird kinship structures. In other words, according to Strauss, the “primitive and irreducible character of the basic unit of kinship . . . is actually a direct result of the universal presence of an incest taboo” (Strauss, 1963, p. 46), which requires that “in human society a man must obtain a woman from another man who gives him a daughter or a sister” (1963, p. 46).

Women, as may be clear from the above, perform the function of the signifier in Strauss’ theorisation of kinship structures: they are the gift that is exchanged among men like the linguistic sign that circulates among speakers, meaningless in itself, but deriving mutable value in relation and through difference within a given system. Insofar as Strauss seems to posit that social organisation is built round this circulation of women among men, women also symbolize the natural and passive poles of the nature/culture and passive/active binaries.

In “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex,” Gayle Rubin (1997) concedes to Strauss’ assertions as long as they are taken to be broad descriptions of the generalisable laws by which many societies and cultures have, and continue to conduct their business. Rubin, however, teases out the more insidious implications of Strauss’ theories from a gender perspective and questions his non-interventionist, distant, observational stance throughout.

According to Rubin, historically, writings about the subject of women have been engagements with the origin and essence of women's socially secondary status and the resultant discrimination they experience. Rubin approaches the problem of women in society by appropriating Marx to her purposes and asking "what is a domesticated woman?" (Rubin, 1997, p. 28). She contends that, "A woman is a woman. She only becomes a domestic, a wife, a chattel, a playboy bunny, a prostitute, or a human dictaphone in certain relations" (1997, p. 28). If that is the case, however, it becomes imperative to scrutinise the "relationships by which a female becomes an oppressed woman" (1997, p. 28). It is here that Rubin believes Strauss' work, along with Freud's, becomes especially vital. Rubin claims the work of these men, blindspots and problems, notwithstanding, supplies "conceptual tools with which one can build descriptions of the part of social life which is the locus of the oppression of women, of sexual minorities, and of certain aspects of human personality within the individual" (1997, p. 28). It allows one to understand gendered and sexed subjectivities as distinct from simply the effect of economic imperatives and modes of production.

Thus, Rubin's critical feminist reading of Strauss, Freud and Lacan enables her to conceptualize a path-breaking formulation of the sex/gender system. Such a system can be seen as a descriptor of the entire network of forces and relations that:

- produce and police sex and gender identities,
- channelise and redirect desires, sexual or otherwise, and
- operationalise women's subordination.

According to Rubin, the sex/gender system can be found in every society and may be roughly understood as "the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied" (Rubin, 1997, p. 28). Rubin concurs with Strauss that kinship relations are the constitutional crux of society, especially "pre-state societies" (1997, p. 34). Where Rubin differs from Strauss is in the latter's analysis of the nature and characteristics of kinship structures, and by extension, of sex/gender systems.

According to Strauss, as stated earlier, the "essence of kinship systems" is the "exchange of women between men" (Rubin, 1997, p.31). In effect, if Strauss' work is to be heeded, "at the most general level, the social organisation of sex [i.e. kinship systems] rests upon gender, obligatory heterosexuality, and the constraint of female sexuality" (Rubin, 1997, p. 40). Thus far, as a description of certain social arrangements of sex, Rubin agrees with Strauss. However, she faults Strauss' position on at least two counts. First, drawing on the Lacanian distinction of being and having the phallus, Rubin shows how women-as-transacted can never be the partners, and therefore, never be the gainers, in the exchange, but only an instrument or means for relations between men:

Postmodernism: If women are the gifts, then it is men who are the exchange partners. And it is the partners, not the presents, upon whom reciprocal exchange confers its quasi-mystical power of social linkage. The relations of such a system are such that women are in no position to realise the benefits of their own circulation. As long as the relations specify that men exchange women, it is men who are the beneficiaries of the product of such exchanges— social organization (Rubin, 1997, p. 37).

Second, she explicitly calls into question the sense of inevitability that informs Strauss' notion of the "exchange of women." Strauss promotes the idea that the incest taboo and its specific operationalising of the exchange of women is everywhere, and necessarily so, coincident with the birth of culture. This makes the subordination of women fundamental to culture. Moreover, as Rubin points out, it makes feminism by definition inimical to culture. However, this is a false binary for Rubin asserts that Strauss is on shaky ground theoretically and empirically. Moreover, "it is even debatable that 'exchange of women' adequately describes all of the empirical evidence of kinship systems" (1997, p. 38). This significant difference in position with Strauss becomes the point of departure for Rubin to formulate the concept of the sex/gender system and the particular feminist politics it urges.

Rubin underscores the reasons for preferring the term sex/gender system over patriarchy while talking about kinship relations. Patriarchy, Rubin contends, is a misleading term in that it blurs this distinction; it makes what is a historical recurrent into a historical given. "Sex/gender system, on the other hand, is a neutral term which refers to the domain and indicates that oppression is not inevitable in that domain, but is the product of the specific social relations which organize it" (Rubin, 1997, p. 33). Obviously, the need of the hour for any feminist programme then would be to thoroughly grasp the "political economy of sexual systems" (1997, p. 39) in order to change it for the better.

Rubin acknowledges that in modern times, kinship relations do not have the same social, political and economic significance that they had in pre-modern cultures. But they will forever remain significant in determining our sex and gender identities, since "human sexual life will always be subject to conventions and human intervention" (Rubin, 1997, p. 52). In such a scenario, Rubin contends that it is especially important to correctly comprehend and consciously determine our sexual acts and choices. Ultimately, she feels that "a thoroughgoing feminist revolution would liberate more than women. It would liberate forms of sexual expression, and it would liberate human personality from the straitjacket of gender" (Rubin, 1997, p. 52). More specifically, she argues that "the sex/gender system must be reorganized through political action" (1997, p. 54).

Feminism, Rubin insists, must not be directed against men per se: it should aim "not ... for the elimination of men, but for the elimination of the social system which creates sexism and gender" (1997, p. 54). Matriarchy is not the answer to the problem of patriarchy, since it simply inverts the logic of patriarchy in favour of women. This is because "we are not only oppressed as women, we are oppressed by having to be women, or men as the case may be" (1997, p. 54). Consequently, Rubin insists that feminists must "dream of the elimination of obligatory sexualities and sex roles" (1997, p. 54). The utopia that Rubin envisages through such feminist politics is "an androgynous and sexless society, in which one's sexual anatomy is irrelevant to who one is, what one does, and with whom one makes love" (1997, p. 54).

As you can see from the above, Gayle Rubin's influential formulation of the sex/gender system and her specific vision for the feminist movement represent a critical mobilisation of Strauss' structuralist theories about kinship relations and social organisation to serve the cause of gender justice. It proved invaluable in providing a framework to understand and theorise the question of sexual

oppression as distinct from the question of economic oppression and class politics. In so doing, it also facilitated newer ways of conceiving solutions to the problems of gender injustice.

Check Your Progress:

i) How did Levi Strauss see kinship?

ii) What did Gayle Rubin find useful in Levi Strauss' conceptualisation of kinship relations?

iii) What did Rubin find troubling about Strauss' approach and which she sought to change through her conceptualisation of the sex/ gender system?

iv) Do you think Rubin says that feminism must attack men or be anti-men? Give reasons for your answer.

2.5 SUSAN LANSER: FEMINIST NARRATOLOGY

Susan S. Lanser is an important theorist of gay and lesbian studies, but her chief contribution has been to the field of narratology. Her essay "Towards a Feminist Narratology" (1991) marks one of the earlier, more significant, markers of a change in the scope and mandate of narratological study. Before we examine Lanser's notion of feminist narratology, let us try to grasp the idea of classic narratology.

Classical narratology, traceable back to the work of the Russian Formalists in general, is primarily rooted in the structuralist revolution of the 1960s. The structuralist revolution exercised a multi-disciplinary influence in the European, and afterwards, Anglo-American academy, and also became the intellectual impetus for the formation of many new disciplines. In fact, narratology is an example of a modern academic discipline that came to new prominence through the agency of structuralism.

While the sources and roots of narratology are readily located, a definition of what the term means is not so easily settled. Narratology or rather narratologie was a term coined by Tzvetan Todorov in 1969. Over the years, it has generated a range of formulations reflecting the different emphases and concerns of the thinkers concerned (see Pedersen, 2001). Some like Rimón-Kenan (1983) and Thomas Pavel (1985) have identified narratology with the poetics of narratives. Others have identified it with the grammar of narrative (Prince, 1973) or the rhetorics of narrative (Booth, 1961). Still others have taken narratology to be the study of narrative method (Ryan, 1979) or narrative models (Genette, 1980).

On the whole, narratologists work with the older formalist and structuralist distinctions between story, plot and discourse. David Lodge (1996) offers one way of coming to grips with this multiplicity of conceptualisation. According to Lodge, the work of narratologists may be seen as ordered around three different components of any narrative, viz.:

- ‘story’ or that which is narrated,
- ‘discourse’ or that which is narrating, and
- the relation between story and discourse.

It falls to Gerald Prince (1995), however, to give us a working definition of the term which will allow us to get a clearer picture what the term means more generally. Calling narratology “a theory of narratives,” Prince states that it “examines what all narratives, and only narratives, have in common as well as what enables them to differ from one another qua narratives, and it aims to describe the narrative-pertinent system of rules presiding over narrative production and processing” (Prince, 1995, p. 110).

Prince (1994) also points to two main factors which indicate the value and importance of narratology. First, narratology has been instrumental in foregrounding how narrative is a specific way in which humans generate, process, relay, store and recall knowledge. Second, Prince points to the “undeniable usefulness of narratological instruments for the description, classification, and interpretation of literary narratives” (1994, p. 98). In other words, he stresses the enormous potential of narratological insights to be productively applied in literary criticism.

For many years, however, the potential of narratology was limited by its structuralist aversion to history, context and specificity. Narratology driven by the delusion of scientificity desired only to discover the general laws that govern any narrative qua narrative, at any point in time or place. The 1980s however was the start of a radical shift in the way narratology would come to be practiced as postclassical narratology which according to David Herman (who came up with the term in an article called “Scripts, Sequences, and Stories”) “is marked by a profusion of new methodologies and research hypotheses” (Herman as ctd. in Alber and Fludernik, 2010, p. 1).

Along with Elaine Showalter, Robyn Warhol and others, Susan Lanser was one of the important scholars who steered narratology into the era of postclassical narratology by pushing narratologists to consider the question of gender as it impacts narratives. First published in 1986, Susan Lanser’s “Towards a Feminist Narratology” attempts to forge a dialogue between two schools of scholarship that have traditionally had little to do with each other: feminism and narratology. The feminist distaste for narratology, Lanser (1991) says, can be attributed, among other things, to the latter’s fondness for technical jargon and binary oppositions. On the other hand, it is also a fact that “virtually no work in the field of narratology has taken gender into account either in designating a canon or in formulating questions and hypotheses. This means, first of all, that the narratives which have provided the foundation for narratology have been either men’s texts or texts treated as men’s texts” (Lanser, 1991, p. 612).

Lanser submits that there are at least three core issues on which narratology and feminism may find it hard to find common ground: “the role of gender in the

construction of narrative theory, the status of narrative as mimesis or semiosis, and the importance of context for determining meaning in narrative” (1991, p. 612). These however, do not negate the benefit that each may derive from the other.

As Lanser explains, “a narratology that cannot adequately account for women’s narratives is an inadequate narratology for men’s texts as well” (1991, p. 614); it is a partial study. In other words, narratology needs to engage more centrally with gender, if it has to become genuinely representative and convincing. Meanwhile, feminism, she asserts, would gain from narratological knowledge because “fiction is the dominant genre in the study of women and literature” (1991, p. 614). Narratology, according to Lanser, could be extremely useful for feminist scholarship to achieve some clarity on an issue that has been the subject of contention for it: “whether there is indeed a ‘women’s writing’ and/or a female tradition, whether men and women do write differently” (1991, p. 614).

With these justifications, Lanser goes on to list the essential characteristics of a feminist narratology:

- i) Feminist narratology would work “with the recognition that revision of a theory’s premises and practices is legitimate and desirable.”
- ii) Feminist narratology “would be probably cautious in its construction of systems and favour flexible categories over fixed categories. It would scrutinize its norms to be sure of what they are normative.”
- iii) Feminist narratology “would be willing to look afresh at the question of gender and to reform its theories on the basis of women’s texts.”
- iv) Feminist narratology “would reflect the mimetic as well as the semiotic experience that is the reading of literature” both conceptually and terminologically.
- v) Feminist narratology “would study narrative in relation to a referential context that is simultaneously linguistic, literary, historical, biographical, social, and political.”

(Lanser, 1991, p. 614)

Let us now look at the final and very interesting section of Lanser’s essay, which is a close narratological study of a letter which appeared in Atkinson’s Casket in April 1832. The letter is supposedly written by a young newly wedded wife whose husband monitors all her correspondence. It reads as follows:

*I cannot be satisfied, my Dearest Friend!
blest as I am in the matrimonial state,
unless I pour into your friendly bosom,
which has ever been in unison with mine,
the various deep sensations which swell
with the liveliest emotions of pleasure
my almost bursting heart. I tell you my dear
husband is one of the most amiable of men,
I have been married seven weeks, and
have never found the least reason to*

*repent the day that joined us, my husband is
in person and manners far from resembling
ugly, crass, old, disagreeable, and jealous
monsters, who think by confining to secure;
a wife, it is his maxim to treat as
a 'bosom-friend and confidant, and not as
a plaything or menial slave, the woman
chosen to be his companion. Neither party
he says ought to obey implicitly;
but each yield to the other by turns- An
ancient maiden aunt, near seventy,
a cheerful, venerable, and pleasant old lady,
lives in the house with us—she is the de
light of both young and old—she is ci
vil to all the neighborhood round,
generous and charitable to the poor-
I know my husband loves nothing more
than he does me; he flatters me more
than the glass, and his intoxication
(for so I must call the excess of his love)
often makes me blush for the unworthiness
of its object, and I wish I could be more deserving of
the man whose name I bear. To
say all in one word, my dear, and to
crown the whole, my former gallant lover
is now my indulgent husband, my fondness
is returned, and I might have had
a Prince, without the felicity I find with
him. Adieu! May you be as blest as I am
un able to wish that I could be more happy.*

(Lanser, 1991, pp. 615-16)

On the surface, this letter is typical of what has been considered women's language, i.e., "polite, emotional, enthusiastic, gossipy, talkative, uncertain, dull and chatty" (Kramarae as cited in Lanser, 1991, p. 617): The "self-effacing narrator praises the 'more deserving' husband and blushes for her own 'unworthiness'" (Lanser, 1991, p. 617). Lanser says that a closer reading, however, discovers a startling subtext to the letter: "The key to the above letter, is to read the first and then every alternate line" (p. 616). Read thus, a trivial, sentimental piece of prose transforms into a complex narrative that demonstrates the lacuna of traditional narratological theories. It also becomes the text through which Lanser demonstrates the possibilities of and for a feminist narratology.

Activity:

Read the above letter in the alternate manner indicated by Lanser. What do you observe? Why do you think the author of the letter concealed this alternate reading within the more obvious reading of the letter?

Focussing her analysis around topics that have been the preserve of classical narratology —i.e., questions about narrative voice, narrative situation and plot (1991, p. 616)—Lanser painstakingly shows how conventional studies are inadequate to comprehend the form, intention and expression of complexly gendered texts such as the letter. Agreeing with Bakhtin (refer to the unit on Bakhtin, Block 2, Unit 2) that all narratives are heteroglossic (see Glossary in Block 2, Unit2), Lanser claims that women’s speech and language in patriarchies are especially and necessarily so, and the polysemous (multiply meaningful), multi-voiced letter is only a more obvious example of this fact (1991, pp. 617-18). An alternate feminist reading of the letter demonstrates how women’s language and texts are not just subversively aspiring to a more assertive, direct and “masculine” speech, but far more significantly articulating sophisticated critiques of patriarchal systems and its operations in culture. To quote Lanser, “The text designed for the husband conceals an undertext (the text designed for the confidante), but the undertext, in turn, creates a new reading of the surface text.” This “third text” Lanser argues, is aimed at “yet another addressee.... the literary reader” (1991, p. 619).

Turning to the issue of narrative situation, Lanser acknowledges Gerard Genette’s contribution to an understanding of the different narrative levels that a single text might contain. Genette’s formulation of extradiegetic (the level of the narrative’s telling or the first level of narration), intradiegetic (inside the first level and at level of a character’s telling), and metadiegetic (level of an embedded tale-within-a-tale second degree narration) levels of narrative, however, is insufficient in itself. In addition to Genette’s system, Lanser proposes “a distinction between public and private narration” (1991, p. 620). While public narrative, she says, is addressed to someone outside the textual world, private narrative is directed at someone within. According to Lanser, this distinction is particularly important to a study of women’s texts as women in patriarchies have had a much more complex and ambivalent relationship to public speech and language. This “rhetorical complexity” (1991, p. 622), according to Lanser, is something that classical narratology has not attended to and which feminist narratology must take account of.

Lanser’s discussion of plot highlights how traditional theorisations of the concept take the male subject and his experiences to be the norm. Consequently, women’s texts are repeatedly constrained to describe themselves in negative terms as plot-less writings. But Lanser says, “If again and again scholars of women’s writing must speak in terms of the ‘plotless’ (usually in quotation marks, suggesting their dissatisfaction with the term), then perhaps something is wrong with the notions of plot that have followed from Propp’s morphology” (1991, p. 624). In fact, an unprejudiced study of the letter alerts one to the possibility of another type of “plot behind women’s ‘plotless’ narrative, the subversive plot of sharing an experience so that the listener’s life may complete

the speaker's tale" (1991, pp. 624-25). Narratology, thus far, Lanser says, has not looked at the implications of such "a crossing of the plot of narration with the story plot" (1991, p. 625).

Lanser ends by reiterating what she feels are some of the questions a feminist narratology must apply itself to and the benefits of such an enterprise. These include "a comprehensive theory of voice" and polyphony, "attention to the rhetorical context of narrative, and a re-examination of "theories of plot and story" in order "to find alternatives to the notion of plot as active acquisition or solution and to incorporate the plot that may be generated by the relationship between narrator and narrate" (1991, p. 625).

Lanser also states that once the shortcomings of classical narratology are exposed from a feminist perspective, this may lead to a reformed narratological practice in the reading of texts by racial and other marginalized constituencies. Thus, a feminist understanding of narratology would help it to move beyond its traditionally narrow concerns and embrace a much wider variety of narrative practices.

Needless to say, Lanser's "Towards a Feminist Narratology" has been an influential text in forging a synthesis between the seemingly disparate agendas and attributes of feminism and narratology.

Box No. 2.2

Let Us Sum Up Lanser's Contributions:

- Classical narratology sought to discover the general laws that govern any narrative, at any time or place. It looked to identify what was unique, special or distinctive about a narrative—what made a particular text or speech into a narrative. Influenced by structuralism, it ignored aspects of context, history and particularity.
- Susan Lanser was troubled by the structuralist excesses of classical narratology. By introducing the factor of gender into the study of narratives, she, in fact, became one of the pioneers of postclassical narratology.
- According to Lanser, feminism and narratology had much to gain from each other. Narratology stood to become a comprehensive discourse by engaging more seriously with gender as this impacted narratives. Similarly, feminism could benefit from narratological precision and systematic methodology in understanding whether there is such a thing as women's writing.
- The feminist narratology that Lanser advocates studies narratives within a broader referential frame to discern the operations of gender in the production and consumption of texts.
- Lanser offers a feminist narratological reading of a letter published in 1832 focussing on specific ways in which narrative voice, situation and plot must be approached to take and make account of the operations of gender in narratives.

2.6 IMPLICATIONS OF FEMINIST READINGS

In this section, we will explore some of the implications of the above reworkings of structuralist thought from a gender perspective. More specifically, we will highlight some of the criticisms and concerns that the above feminist interventions have attracted.

Luce Irigaray, the first feminist theorist we focussed on has long had to fight the charge of essentialism. For instance, Janet Sayers, in *Biological Politics*, accuses Irigaray of biological essentialism. According to Sayers, Irigaray makes female biology (“two lips”) the basis and explanation of uniquely female sexuality and desire. Citing Freud, Sayers maintains that there is little evidence to support Irigaray’s claims about a feminine libido (Sayers, 1982, p. 131). Moreover, she claims Irigaray is misguided in thinking that her ethics of sexual difference will serve the cause of women’s empowerment:

The slogan ‘equal but different,’ though it certainly rallies support from some within today’s women’s movement, will not however ultimately serve women. It is, I would suggest, unrealistic to seek for sexual equality on the condition that women occupy an essentially different and separate place in society from that occupied by men. (1982, p. 132)

Similarly, Toril Moi takes Luce Irigaray to task for failing to take into consideration the historical and economic specificity of patriarchal power. According to Moi, this failure forces Irigaray “into providing exactly the kind of metaphysical definition of woman she declaredly wants to avoid” (Moi, 1985, p. 148). According to Moi, Irigaray’s “superb critique of patriarchal thought is partly undercut by her attempt to name the feminine” (Moi, 1985, p. 148). Disagreeing with Irigaray, Moi feels that it might serve feminist theory better to abandon “the minefield of femininity and femaleness for a while” and approach “the questions of oppression and emancipation from a different direction” (Moi, 1985, p. 148).

Monique Plaza is equally sceptical about the value of Irigaray’s work for furthering the cause of women’s emancipation. According to Plaza, Irigaray’s theorisation is part of what she calls the “patriarchal vicious cycle” (Plaza, 1980, p. 98). According to Plaza, on the one hand, it asserts the non- existence of women and, on the other “encloses us in the shroud of our sex” (Plaza, 1980, p. 97). Accusing Irigaray of essentialism, Plaza asserts that Irigaray’s insistence on the notion of difference is reductionist and can only lead to an essentialist trap for women (Plaza, 1980, p. 94).

Elizabeth Grosz, however, counters these criticisms by pointing out how many of them stem from a “profound misreading of Irigaray’s claims. They substantialise or ontologise what, for Irigaray, is a discursive or deconstructive strategy” (Grosz, 1989, p. 241n7). According to Grosz, Irigaray deals with morphology not with anatomy: “Bodies are not conceived by Irigaray as biologically or anatomically given, inert, brute objects, fixed by nature once and for all. She sees them as the bearers of meanings and social values, the products of social inscription, always inherently social” (1989, p. 112). Grosz holds that Irigaray’s attempt is to reconceive “the female body as a positivity rather than a lack” (1989, p. 110). From this perspective, it should be clear then that what Irigaray attempts is ultimately a necessary and valuable intervention for feminism.

Gayle Rubin's influential "sex/gender system" has attracted its fair share of criticism from different feminist scholars too. Jane Flax, for instance, takes issue with how Rubin takes for granted and legitimizes the distinction between sex and gender in the theorisation of the sex/gender system. According to Flax, "Rubin locates the origins of gender systems in the 'transformation of raw biological sex into gender.'" But Flax alleges that Rubin's differentiation between sex and gender rests "upon a series of oppositions, which [are]... very problematic, including the opposition of 'raw biological sexuality' and the social" (Flax, 1990, p. 46). Instead of being a truth to be uncritically believed, Flax argues that the "split between culture and natural sexuality may in fact be rooted in and reflect gender arrangements" (1990, p. 46). Rubin's conceptualisation of the sex/gender system unfortunately shuts off this line of inquiry by accepting the sex/ gender binary.

While Rubin herself has acknowledged some of the shortcomings of her theorisation of the sex/gender system and indeed moved away from it in her later work, it is important to understand both the importance of her early work and continued defence of it. According to Rubin, at the time of writing "Traffic in Women":

I felt that if people privileged Marxism as the theory with which to approach the oppression of women, then they were going to miss a lot, and they did. I think of "Traffic" as a neo-Marxist, proto-pomo exercise. It was written on the cusp of a transition between dominant paradigms, both in progressive intellectual thought in general, and feminist thought in particular. But the basic problem was that Marxism had a weak grasp of sex and gender, and had intrinsic limitations as a theoretical framework for feminism (Butler & Rubin, 1994, p. 66).

Ultimately, whatever else its problems, Rubin's sex/gender conceptualisation provided a generation of feminist scholars a new and useful way of grasping the social production of gender and women's oppression. It enabled them to view oppression neither as a minor offshoot of Marxist class conflict, nor as something limited to the psychic structures of psychoanalytic discourse.

Susan Lanser's call for a feminist narratology while generally welcomed, also invited a sharp rebuttal from Nilli Diengott. In fact, her article "Narratology and Feminism," first published in 1988, involved her in what came to be known as the Lanser-Diengott debate in narratology circles. According to Diengott (2000), the motivations and aims of feminist scholarship and narratology are irreconcilable. As such there is neither any purpose to be served by the kind of scholarship Lanser envisions in "Towards a Feminist Narratology" nor any realistic scope for it. In fact, Diengott asserts that attempts such as Lanser's to bring the two disparate discourses together, while likely well-intentioned, are, in the final analysis, based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature, aims and remit of narratology: Lanser's "analysis is based on a confusion of theoretical poetics with other fields within the study of literature, such as interpretation, historical poetics, or criticism" (Diengott, 2000, p. 203).

Strongly refuting Lanser's suggestion that narratology stands to gain from an engagement with feminism and must if necessary "be willing to cede some precision and simplicity for the sake of relevance and accessibility," Diengott asks, "First, exactly how much does ceding 'some precision and simplicity' involve?" (2000, p. 203). Second, and more to the point:

narratology is not relevant to anything but the questions it poses. And any theory that does strive for precision and simplicity is working in opposition to what theory is all about. Relevance and accessibility are just pleasant-sounding slogans designed to allay the fears of those suspicious of theory (Diengott, 2000, p. 203).

According to Diengott, gender is an important consideration in interpretation. Where Susan Lanser goes wrong, she says, is in failing to grasp that narratology is not concerned with interpretation: “feminist critics, even of the best kind, as I think Lanser is, are not always clear in their own minds about defining their object of inquiry” (Diengott, 2000, p. 203).

Gerald Prince, while not as categorical as Diengott in his rebuttal of Lanser’s call for a feminist narratology, is nonetheless clear that “...like Nilli Diengott, I don’t believe that gender is a differentia specifica of narrative. Any more than race, ethnicity, class, or religion, are” (Qiao and Prince, 2012, p. 41). However, he also qualifies his disagreements with Lanser’s position by adding that gender does impact narrative and that feminist narratology’s focus on gender “has increased our knowledge of narrative” (Qiao and Prince, 2012, p. 41).

More recently, feminist scholars such as Ruth E. Page have pointed to how Lanser’s brand of feminist narratology:

- a) limited itself to literature and the literary and ignored linguists,
- b) assumed a monolithic as well as abstract notion of gender, and
- c) implied a simplistic correspondence between narrative structure or form and gender

(Lanser, 1986)

According to Page, in fact, one of the important results of integrating linguistic and literary scholarship vis-à-vis narratology is “a heightened awareness that gender cannot be understood as a universal concept” (Page, 2006, p. 176).

Despite these criticisms and reservations, feminist narratology has over the years gained much greater popularity, acceptance as well as depth. And Susan Lanser’s contribution to pioneering this feminist narratology is indisputable.

Check Your Progress:

i) What are some of the criticisms against the alleged essentialism of Irigaray’s works?

ii) How does Elizabeth Grosz defend Irigaray against such criticisms?

iii) What is the substance of Jane Flax’s critique of Rubin’s sex/ gender system?

iv) What other sorts of criticism has Rubin's work attracted?

v) Why does Nilli Diengott disagree with Lanser?

2.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have focussed on three prominent feminist reworkings of structuralist theories. We began with how Luce Irigaray broke away from Freud-Lacanian theories and came up with the idea of a new libidinal economy that drew from the specific morphological contours of female sexuality. This was followed by a study of Gayle Rubin's radical reordering of Levi-Strauss and others to delineate her conceptualisation of the sex/ gender system. Next, we looked at how Susan Lanser reconceived structuralist narratology in order to make her call for a feminist narratology. Finally, we have briefly attended to some of the implications of these rewritings of structuralist tenets from a feminist perspective. After perusal, it is hoped that this unit will have equipped you to meaningfully discuss how structuralism has been adapted to and revised for different feminist scholarly goals and situations. It is also hoped, that the unit will have enabled you to grapple with the some of the major concerns that the specific feminist interventions dealt with in the unit have generated among other feminist scholars as well as academics in general.

2.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1)
 - a) Discuss Luce Irigaray's alternate understanding of female libidinal economy.
 - b) What are some of the feminist criticisms of Irigaray's theorisation as discussed above?
- 2)
 - a) Explain what Gayle Rubin means by the sex/gender system.
 - b) Discuss some of the problems that critics have pointed out in Rubin's conceptualisation of the sex/gender system.
- 3) Clarify some of the points of agreement and disagreement between Gayle Rubin and Levi-Strauss in the context of kinship structures and gender politics.
- 4) Elaborate on the arguments advanced by Susan Lanser for a "feminist narratology."
- 5) What are some of the concerns that critics have about Susan Lanser's brand of feminist narratology? Do you agree or disagree with these? Elaborate and discuss.

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UNIT 3 SEMIOTICS AND THE VISUAL: MEDIATIONS

Structure

- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Learning Outcomes
- 3.3 Principles of Semiotics
- 3.4 Roland Barthes and Myth
- 3.5 Semiotics of Advertisement
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3.1 INTRODUCTION

In simple parlance, semiotics is the study of signs and symbols. In Unit 1 of this block, you have learnt about Semiotics in the context of structuralism. Now, let us try to understand the complex relationship between Semiotics as a discipline and Visual culture by focusing our analysis on advertisements. A semiotic analysis is often used to critique the mythic structures that advertisements work to communicate. Using semiotics we will decode the social myths the advertisements draw on and analyse whether they reinforce or challenge them.

In order to do this, we will first discuss the main components of semiotics as derived by Ferdinand de Saussure and then Charles S. Peirce. We will then move on to Roland Barthes's myth construction, and then to a seminal text *Ways of seeing* (2008) by John Berger. Lastly, we will understand the ideology, mythic structures and the referent system that underplays advertisements by way of discussing Judith Williamson's book *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* (2002).

3.2 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completing this unit you should learn about:

- The basic aspects of Semiotics.
- The importance of Semiotics in contemporary visual culture through cinema, advertisements, television, painting and signboards; and
- Conduct a Semiotic analysis of cultural products like advertisements and relate them to questions of power and representation in our society.

3.3 PRINCIPLES OF SEMIOTICS

By now, you are already familiar with the work of the French linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure. Let us once more review his contributions before we apply these in the context of visual culture for the purposes of this unit. Saussure, in his book *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), posits that signs are made up of two parts: a signifier (a sound, an object, an image) and a signified (a concept generated by the signifier). The vehicle, which expresses the sign, is called the signifier. For example, the word 'cat', the letters separately i.e. 'c', 'a', 't', form the signifier. When we read the word, a mental picture of a cat is conjured up in our minds. This mental picture or the concept, which the signifier calls forth, is the signified.

Moreover, signs are arbitrary. The linguistic sign 'cat' has no relation to the 'cat' in reality in terms of its sound, physical appearance etc. This occurs because of social convention and an agreement among a group of users that a particular sign shall denote a particular something. According to Saussure, each linguistic sign has a place in the system of language or *langue* (French), and every speech or writing according to the rules of the *langue* is *parole* (French). In any language for utterances to be meaningful, they have to fall in line with the widely accepted rules of the language. Whereas, the actual things, which signs refer to, are called 'referents.'

Furthermore, Saussure (2011) points out that every sign in any *langue* derives its meaning by virtue of its difference to other signs. We recognize the sign 'cat', by its difference to 'dog', 'apple' etc. So language is a system of differences between one sign and all others, where the difference between one sign and the others allows distinctions of meaning to be made. The systems in which signs are organized into groups are called codes. For example, different dress codes apply for office, party or casual wear. Saussure distinguished between the evolution of linguistic signs through time, called 'diachronic' linguistics, and the study of signs existing at a given point in time, called 'synchronic' linguistics. To explain this, Jonathan Bignell (2002) uses the example of jeans. Today jeans are associated with connotations of 'casual style' or 'youthfulness'. The coded meaning of jeans depends on its relationship with and, difference from other coded signs in the clothing system today, and does not depend on the history of jeans. Therefore, synchronic analysis reveals more about the contemporary meaning of jeans than diachronic analysis. So, as Bignell (2002) says, the systems which structure our language also shape our experiences of reality.

In linguistic signs, language is always dependent upon time. While writing or speaking, one sign must follow the other, spread out over time. In photographs, paintings and other visual forms, each sign is present at the same time as others and these are distributed across space rather than time. Whereas in cinema, both space and time are involved. In most languages, we read from left to right. Jonathan Bignell points out that in the sentence, 'The dog bites the man', if it is read from right to left, its meaning will be completely transformed. This horizontal movement is termed as the 'syntagmatic' aspect of the sentence. As a general principle, every sign that is present must be considered in relation to other signs present in the structure articulation, and every sign present has meaning by virtue of the other signs which have been excluded and are not present in the text (Bignell, 2002, p. 14).

Saussure called his theory of signs as semiology, from the Greek term for signs, semeion. Post Saussure, an American philosopher, Charles S. Peirce (1931), proposed a different theory of signs, which he called semiotics. In recent times, Peirce's term 'semiotics' has become widely accepted as the term to be employed for the analysis and interpretation of signs. As in linguistic signs, visual signs have codes and are characterized by arbitrariness; Peirce calls this the 'symbolic' sign. Additionally, when a signifier resembles the referent, Peirce calls this an 'iconic' sign. Iconic signs have the property to merge the signifier, signified and referent and thus in a photographic sign, it is difficult to distinguish among them (Peirce, 1931). It is precisely for this reason that Bignell claims that photographic media is more realistic than the linguistic media.

When a cat is hungry, it meows to gain our attention, as a way of making us realize its presence. Peirce terms this kind of sign as 'indexical'. Indexical signs have a concrete and often causal relationship with the signified. Bignell gives the example of a traffic light which has mixed symbolic and indexical components. When the traffic light signals red, it is an indexical sign as it means that the cars must wait, and simultaneously a symbolic sign as red arbitrarily signifies danger and prohibition in this context (Bignell, 2002, p. 13).

In the next section, we will examine how these theories were further developed and refined by Roland Barthes.

3.4 ROLAND BARTHES AND MYTH

In 1957, the French philosopher and critic Roland Barthes published a book called *Mythologies*. The book consists of short essays, in which Barthes uses semiotics as the predominant means of analyzing aspects of everyday culture. The book concludes with an essay titled, "Myth Today" in which Barthes attempts to explain how he derived his meanings for his first section of the book. In *Mythologies* Barthes analyzes texts as disparate as soap-powders and detergents, toys, the face of the renowned movie star Greta Garbo, and practices like wine drinking and Steak and Chips. He reads or deconstructs each image or product as to how they help in strengthening societal norms and rituals. He also simultaneously shows how these images facilitate the domination of the petit-bourgeoisie in the daily life of the 1950's in France.

In "Myth Today", Barthes (1957) takes from Ferdinand de Saussure, his notion of the signifier, signified and the sign. In Barthes' application of this notion to the objects and practices of everyday life, he takes the analysis a step further and invests a further layer of meaning in each sign - the mythological meaning or cultural subtext that underlies the primary linguistic meaning. He names the language system that myth appropriates the "language-object", while myth itself is termed the "metalanguage", i.e. that language which is used to structure and manipulate everyday language. On the level of everyday language, the signifier is the "meaning" but on the level of myth, it becomes the "form". The signified remains the "concept" in both cases. That which is the "sign" on the first level, however, is equated to "signification" at the level of myth. For example, he deconstructs a photograph of a black man saluting the French flag on the cover of *Paris-Match* and explores the layers of meaning this image conveys, with the physical image on the paper serving as the original signifier and the signified being the literal reading of patriotism in terms of a loyal citizen saluting the flag, while the deeper or "mythological" meaning of the entire sign becomes

a reinforcement of French imperialism by implying that France's non-White "citizens" in colonial territories were content and fulfilled in their role relative to the Empire. Myth being a "second order semiological system", the sign in the first system, which in this case is "the purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness" embodied in the figure of the black citizen saluting the flag, becomes a signifier in the second system that represents a bourgeoisie ideological glorification of Empire (Barthes, 1973, p.115).

According to Barthes (1957), there are three potential ways to relate to myth: as a producer, as a reader or as a decipherer of mythological speech. The task of the mythologist is to delve beneath several layers of meaning to uncover the ideological structure at the base, exposing the deceptive innocence of mythical speech as a sham. This process restores a sense of "history" and political relevance to naturalized images such as the "Negro- giving-the-salute" in the example above.

This mythological layer of meaning, then, despite its seemingly a historical "naturalness" and innocence, is determined by historical processes and motivated by the desire of dominant groups to maintain their ideologies and power. Myth, therefore, reflects the power structure in society at any given time. The hegemonic influence wielded by the petit-bourgeoisie, in Barthes' view, lies in their ability to construct an image of reality that seems most natural and "real" to the rest of society, even if it represents an ideal unattainable by these other segments of the population. It is the manufactured and ideological aspect of this taken-for-granted sphere of daily life that he wishes to reveal for what it is "In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves" (Barthes, 1989, p. 156).

Thus, Myth according to Barthes is a type of speech that uses signs to communicate a social and political message about the world. Myth involves manipulating or forgetting of alternative messages, so that myth appears to be exclusively true, rather than other possible messages existing. The ideology conveyed tends to naturalize something which in real is actually human-constructed. By "myths", Barthes intends that all interpretations that humans in general and the Bourgeoisie in particular impose upon events are done to bolster their own social dominance.

3.5 SEMIOTICS OF ADVERTISEMENTS

Advertising is a kind of popular culture, and it is a major way through which we learn about, and learn how to, interpret other kinds of popular culture. As a major mode of socialisation, advertisements tell us how to think and feel (defining notions of normalcy, fashion, style and sexiness) and what is important in everyday life (latest gadgets, fairness of skin, size of one's body). Barthes' (1957) notion of Mythology is helpful here in understanding the creation of ideology or myth by the advertiser, in order to make them heard through processes of naturalization and making them look innocent. The same can be said about advertisements; they are designed to persuade the consumers.

John Berger in his *Ways of Seeing* (2008) asserts that seeing comes before words. He points out that the way we see things is determined by what we know. Seeing and recognition comes before words and thereafter we use the requisite words from our language to explain what we see in the world. He further points out that what we know, our beliefs, our experiences and our knowledge affects the way we see things. He quotes the example of how today we see fire in a different light, whereas people in the Middle Ages associated it with hell.

According to Berger, the social presence of a woman is different from that of a man. Men are measured by the degree of power they wield, where power could be of several kinds - moral, physical, social, economic or sexual. A man's presence suggests what he may or may not be able to do to or for you. A woman's presence in contrast indicates what can or cannot be done to her. Every action of a woman contributes to her presence. A woman is born into the keeping of a man, taught since childhood to constantly survey herself to be appreciated, appreciated ultimately by men. Hence, her sense of being is split into two, that of the surveyed and the surveyor. Berger simplifies this by saying that men act, whereas women appear and that a woman watches herself being looked at. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object, and most importantly, an object of vision: a sight (Berger, 2008, p. 41).

Berger illustrates that in the nudes of European oil paintings, women were the predominant subjects. The earliest representations of the nude are found in the story of Adam and Eve. For Berger they establish two striking elements. First, after consuming the apple they saw each other in a different light, therefore nakedness was in the eye of the beholder. Second, the woman is blamed and as way of punishment is made subservient to the man. During the Renaissance, the story disappeared with the emphasis more on the moment of shame being directed at the viewer. Gradually, the shame became a display. However, as paintings became more secular, in all the implication was that the woman is aware of the spectator.

To establish his point Berger discusses many examples of nudes, such as nudes looking into the mirrors and being accused of vanity, or nudes looking at the viewer looking at them. The common thread moving along is the desire of the male to see a woman naked, a sense of women being watched, their bodies always turned towards the viewer, especially the male viewer.

For Berger, 'publicity' is the same as advertising images/photographs. According to him, in our society today, the concentration of these images is so high and frequent that we take them for granted. These visual images are fleeting which refer to the future. Therefore, they seem to continually pass us, so they are seen as dynamic and us as static. Publicity is usually explained and justified as a competitive medium, which ultimately benefits the public (the consumer) and the most efficient manufacturers and thus the national economy. The great hoardings and the publicity neons of the cities of capitalism are the immediate visible sign of 'The Free World' (Berger, 2008, p.125).

Judith Williamson takes forward the concepts introduced by Roland Barthes regarding Mythologies or myths further in her book *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* (1981). She explains how the meanings of a sign are willingly transferred into a mythology in advertisements to give a meaningless product some significance. Her aim is to uncover the deceptive

mythology that these advertisements propagate. By the rationale of Saussure, she argues that meaning is conveyed by a signified in its reference to a signifier. The signified is ideas, and the signifier is a thing: together, they form a 'sign' and are completely inseparable in any form of communication. According to Williamson, the function of the overt meaning in an advertisement is to create in the minds of the viewer a less obvious or a latent meaning. For this to be possible and for semiotically analysing advertisements, three points need to be kept in mind:

- The correlation between signifier and signified is non-sequential, they are linked because of formal structures (i.e. their relative place in the frame, editing techniques, use of color, and so on).
- The viewer is the most active in the process as he/she is required to make the transfer of meanings possible.
- The element from which the product acquires meaning, must have significance in another system of meanings which exist outside of advertising (referent system).

Williamson (1981) argues that the real distinctions between people are created by their role in production. However, in advertisements, it is the products produced which create a distinction as a result of the invocation of the false categories by these ads. They obscure the real distinctions in the society by way of replacing them with the consumption patterns of the society. Hence, from this arises the false assumption that a person with two cars and a TV is not part of the working class. Through the act of buying something, one is given a false sense of upward rise or fall in the society. Williamson terms this as ideology. She says, "Ideology is the meaning made necessary by the conditions of society while helping to perpetuate those conditions. We feel a need to belong, to have a social place; it can be hard to find. Instead we may be given an imaginary one" (Williamson, 1981, p. 13).

In the context of advertisements, though we are unaware of the ideology, we inevitably participate in the creation and interpretation of meaning. The illusion is that we are free to act according to our tastes. Ideology operates under the assumption that we do not question as they are already seen as true. Advertisements create an 'alreadyness' of 'facts'. Williamson also points out that advertisements speak in our language. Since advertisements have no clear subject that they address, a gap arises in communication. The speaker of the advertisement and us the listeners try to fill this gap as we watch, where we become simultaneously listener and speaker, subject and object of the advertisement.

The viewer unconsciously links products, signs, symbols and creates the meaning of an ad which Williamson calls the currency of signs. Currency is something which represents a value in its interchangeability with other things and in turn gives them their value too (Williamson, 1981, p. 20). The concept of currency is a useful metaphor for the transference of meaning. This meaning is so intimately connected with real money transactions. In real money transactions as we know money becomes interchangeable only in a referent system in which each currency like the Indian Rupee and the British Pound or the European Union Euro has a curtailed assigned value with reference to each other. The currency of signs is also such an interconnected system.

To explain further Williamson goes back to Barthes who says that advertisements denote one thing while connote something else (Williamson, 1981, p.33). Williamson points out that in denotation a signifier means or denotes something signified, whereas in connotation the signifier is itself the denoting sign, and the sign in its totality points to something else. It is this, something else, that Williamson terms as a 'Referent System'. And for the product to symbolize something, the viewer must have knowledge of this referent system so as to complete the transfer of meaning as intended by the advertiser.

Williamson describes this with an example of an ad in which the face of Catherine Deneuve, a famous French actress, is placed beside a perfume bottle of 'Chanel No 5'. To decipher the ad, the reader must refer to the referent system of celebrities, which marks Deneuve as different from other celebrities. The reader is then able to make a connection between the signified of Deneuve as sophisticated, elegant and the signified perfume. Hence, the transference of meaning from the celebrity to the perfume bottle is complete (Williamson, 1981, p. 43).

Accordingly, Williamson points out the presence of a meta-structure that refers to the fact that an advertisement can possess two systems: the referent system that gives the ad meaning, and the product's system (the status of the product within the world of similar products). This is what makes an ad readable; receivers must take into account what items inside the ad mean in the outside referent system and in the context of the particular type of product's system (Williamson 1981, p. 42).

In the context of high-fashion advertising, Williamson mentions about the product being a signifier. She says that after the transference of the meaning, the product itself comes to 'mean'. The ad with Angelina Jolie placed below appeared in May-June 2011, with Cambodia as the backdrop. The tagline below reads, "A single journey can change the course of a life. Cambodia, May 2011." Along with the print ads, a 10 minute video was also released, with Angelina Jolie sitting amidst the riverine landscape of Cambodia and describing her relationship with Cambodia as one characterized by deep emotions. Angelina Jolie first visited Cambodia during the shooting of her movie 'Lara Croft: Tomb Raider' in 2000. She found the place breathtaking, and returned subsequently as the goodwill ambassador for UNHCR to raise awareness about the dangers of landmines. She then adopted her eldest son, Maddox, from one of the orphanages there. In 2005, King Norodom Sihamoni awarded her the Cambodian citizenship, for her humanitarian work. Post the adoption, Jolie's image transformed into that of a humanitarian and a mother. Since then she has adopted children from Ethiopia and Vietnam besides giving birth herself, thus creating a rainbow family. Overtime this has established her as a devoted mother, with picture perfect snapshots of her and her children along with her partner, spending time together as a 'family'. But more importantly, it is a family which epitomizes the ideal of equality and non-discrimination. The strong message that goes out is that of a family with strong ideals, which is committed to promoting equality and at the same time practicing it as well, a model family to be emulated by the others as affluent and well off as them. She founded the Maddox Jolie foundation which is dedicated to community development and environmental conservation in Cambodia's north-western province Battambang and also established the Jolie-Pitt Foundation humanitarian causes worldwide. When she sold the photos of her biological children to leading magazines, the

proceeds went to her Jolie-Pitt foundation. Jolie has been on field missions around the world and has met with refugees and internally displaced people in more than thirty countries. She is noted for not shying away from traveling to areas that are at war: she visited the Darfur region of Sudan during the Darfur conflict in 2004; Chad during its civil war in 2007; Iraq during the Second Gulf War in 2007 and 2009; Afghanistan during the on-going war in 2008 and 2011; and Libya during the Libyan Revolution in 2011. In addition she has received awards for her efforts such as the inaugural Humanitarian Award by the Church World Service's Immigration and Refugee Program, the Citizen of the World Award by United Nations Correspondents Association etc. She is today renowned more for her humanitarian causes, performing her duty due to her virtue of being a part of humanity in addition to raising her rainbow family, than as a Hollywood actress. Keeping in view this background, the tagline of this ad, that a single journey can change the course of a life resonates with Jolie's transformation after her movie shooting in Cambodia and is more than apt to further be the carrier of the message that LV (Louis Vuitton) via its core ad campaign is striving to send across.



LOUIS VUITTON. A Single Journey can change the course of a life.

Cambodia, May 2011 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/06/13/angelina-jolie-louis-vuitton_n_875851.html

The ad is set in the scenic riverine landscape of Siem Reap province. Jolie is seen sitting on a traditional wooden boat, barefoot with her vintage LV A1 hold all, which she owns in real life too. In the ad, Jolie's jeans are rolled up and her clothes indicate rough usage; moreover, her 'naturally' wind-swept hair, translucent or with no make-up and her 'natural' surroundings are all geared to convey the 'nature' of the person. The idea is to depict Jolie's original, natural self when she is doing what she does from her heart, and that she does make an impact on everybody highlighting the cause of Cambodia and how her Cambodian experience led to change in her priorities in life, which became dedicating to fight for humanitarian causes worldwide. Furthermore her weather beaten and adventurous appearance seeks to showcase her courageous and daring aspect of her personality (visiting areas of conflict), somebody who does not merely mince words but also undertakes due course of action in order to change the order of the things. The 'natural' look of the advertisement can

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be further explained by Williamson's explanation of 'the natural'. According to her, being 'natural' did not have the positive connotations, until the 18th century and the Romantic era. This change in society's view of 'the natural', no doubt stems from a change in material conditions; the importance of 'the natural' increases directly in proportion as society's distance from nature is increased, through technological development (Williamson, 1981, p. 124). The human being's relationship with nature is inevitably a dialectical one: it gives us our existence, and yet we must work on it and struggle with it to survive. In an advertisement, the referent (the natural product), is presented with the product and both are merged. In this instance, the referent is the 'natural' Angelina Jolie and her experiences of her emotional journey being transferred onto the LV bag, which has along the way been subject to the same emotional upheavals and achievements as Jolie.

Thus, the transference process is complete and when a consumer buys an LV bag, they get to acquire the brand's meaning and in turn become a part of the remarkable journeys undertaken by the celebrities which completely transform them into better human beings. While decoding the ultimate message of an advertisement relies solely on the viewers, in the process the viewers transform into product themselves. Appellation, the process of recognizing oneself as a subject, is crucial to the creation of meaning for a product. Williamson argues that appellation involves an exchange between us as an individual, and the imaginary subject addressed by the advertisement (Williamson, 1981, p.64).

Sara Mills, in her *Feminist Stylistics*, discusses how the fragmentation of the female body leads to the body becoming depersonalized, objectified and reduced into parts. These fragmented parts correspond directly to male focalization and hence the female body is objectified for the male gaze. In a patriarchal society the female body has always served as the object of thorough male scrutiny in advertising and mass media (Mills, 2002, p.6). The male gaze is that of the dominant one and in addition, the male gaze is not exclusively exercised by men alone. As explained by John Berger whom we discussed earlier, when a woman is born she is kept within the allotted and confined space, into the keeping of a man. A woman must continually watch herself, survey everything of herself and most crucially how she appears to men. Hence, she becomes the surveyor and the surveyed. The presence of nudity of women in European oil painting treads the same line of thought, where the paintings of women are there to present or offer themselves to the eyes or pleasure of the man. Woman offers her femininity.

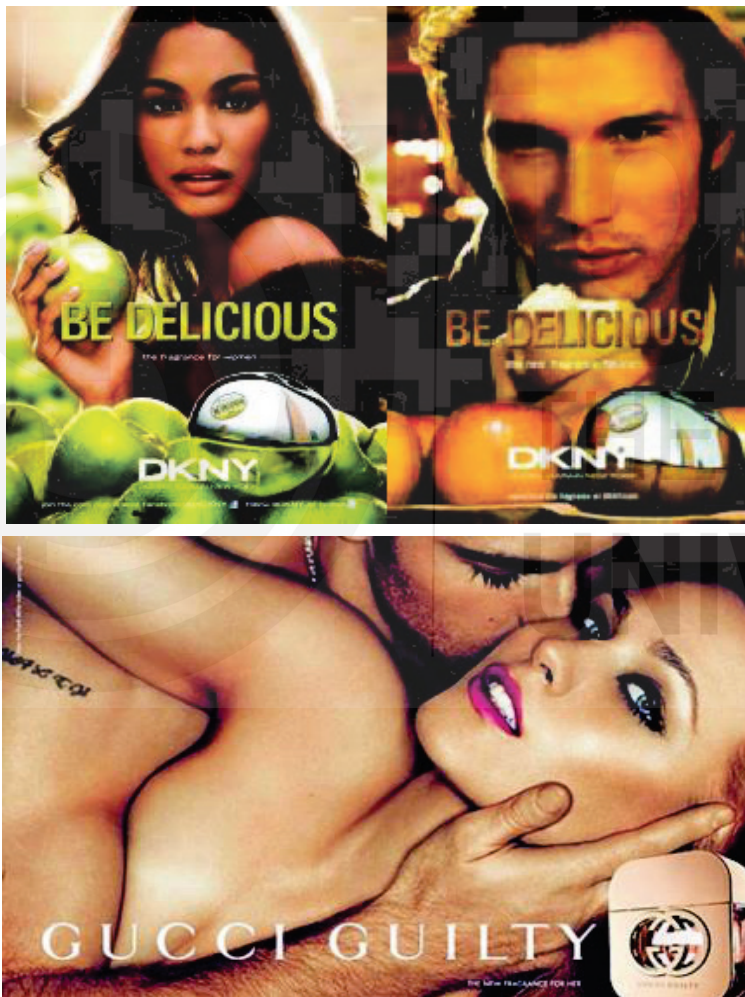
Judith Williamson explains this by way of the 'Absent Man'. According to her there isn't literally an absence of a man, but someone is conspicuous by his absence signified by the clues in the advertisement. According to Williamson the man in these advertisements is nowhere and yet everywhere, a pervasive presence defining and determining everything, and in whose term the woman must define herself. She is doomed to see herself through his eyes, describe herself in his language. To contrast this Williamson uses

Check Your Progress:

i) How are women turned into objects of sight in the history of visual arts?

ii) Why does Judith Williamson feel that advertisements propagate deceptive mythology?

iii) What is Judith Williamson's concept of Currency of Signs?



Source: <http://thesmokingnun.wordpress.com/2011/06/02/chris-evans-launches-gucci-guilty-por-homme/>

The advertisements depicted above follow the same line of thought as explained by Berger (2008) and Williamson (1981). In all the perfume ads featuring women, the model is offering herself for the benefit of the male viewer, as illustrated by Berger with the help of the Bronzino painting, 'Venus, Cupid and Time (Allegory of Lust)' (Berger, 2008, p 64). <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/bronzino-an-allegory-with-venus-and-cupid>

Such images seek to reinforce the male gaze of women being objectified as sexual objects. The models used are beautiful, young women who pander to the male fantasy. They appear desirable, submissive to the demands of the man. The male perfume ads on the other hand are contrary to the images of women in perfume ads. They are shown as upright, looking at you, as if inviting you to comprehend what are the desires of a man, and what they enjoy or how they would expect the woman viewer respond to him (Sarkar, 2012, p. 62). Additionally, their parted lips and bare bodies have sexual connotations. According to Williamson, sex becomes a referent system, always hinted at, and referred to, in innuendo, double entendre, or symbolism (Williamson, 1981, p. 65).

3.6 SEMIOTICS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The recent change in advertisement world has seen is drastic and at much faster pace than it used to be decades ago. The new form of media, especially the social media has changed the trend of viewing and gauging the advertisement. The AI sets up the tone to which the user or accountholder wants to view. Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Threads and Twitter (now X) use their algorithms with the help of AI to generate the advertisement/s required by the user to watch and like them accordingly. For example, if you think of buying new eyewear/s, the AI will generate all those advertisement of eyewears they have catalogued in their algorithms.

The colour codes of these social media logos carry a meaning much more than one imagines. For instance Facebook has a blue logo. The masculine colour coding of blue has become redundant, it rather signifies reliability and stability. Note here that Twitter also had a blue logo, but it discontinued this logo and changed to X. The faith and stability that one seeks for social circle, moved to the virtual world, and today it has become our part of life. The users update all information they feel comfortable with it, as the blue colour suggests the reliability and immense support. The emotions of friendship shifted to this virtual world, and simultaneously reduced the intermingling of physical social circle. Blue also symbolises depression and loneliness, so many psychologists feel that virtual world do lead the user to be lonely at times.

YouTube has a red logo, signifying passion and boldness, and noticeably the accountholders do post videos of desire, love and passion. Interestingly the red colour in India has purity and fertility attached to it. Hence videos across YouTube generate these meanings all the time. Similar to that of Instagram logo, where beside red, magenta, purple and yellow are also added. These colours have several significations. While magenta symbolises the universal harmony and mental balance, purple signifies creativity, gender and spirituality. Yellow symbolises happiness and joy. Interesting to read the logo of Instagram, it not only allows the accountholders to play with their gender perfromativity also make them lose their locationality and temporality.

Threads and X have their logos designed in black, symbolising not only abundance of power, also gives them the feeling of royalty and opulence. Thus, it generates the feeling of control over everyone. a sense of power is generated through any accountholder, and germinates the feeling of control on others.

The semiotics of social media has been turned around with every passing minute, changes to a different and distinct technical creativity. Emotional involvement becomes prominent with every user of these media accounts. Their

place of functionality or operating the account may vary, but it doesn't change the morphological mapping of emotions related to it. The time lost in keeping oneself busy or engaging in creating the content, can never be retrieved from the physical existence of a particular accountholder. Žižek comments that such involvement of spatiality and temporality leads in diffusion and dilution one's identity cartographically. The idea of abjection and epistemological existence of the individual in that moment might seem universalised phenomenon of identity but it's much more just beyond narcissism and power dynamics. Guattari and Deleuze argue that the essence of human life has become robotic, as everyone is copying each other and the product that is being manufactured by these social media is more to do with anthropocenic visibility and survivality. For example, every man is keeping beard or hitting the gymnasiums to bulk up their muscles, while every woman is busy adorning her hour-glass physique. The other genders also make themselves visible through various performativity. As mentioned, the social media has compelled to experimentalise with gender performativity of the accountholders. The semiotics of these social media has changed the haptic cartographies of gender identities.

3.7 LET US SUM UP

This unit summarised the principles of semiotics and its relevance to the field of visual studies. Through the works of the pioneers Ferdinand D. Saussure and C.S. Pierce, language has been rethought in 20th century as central to how human beings articulate the world. We examined the linguistic unit of sign as explained by Saussure, a double entity comprised of signifier and signified. We then proceeded to understand Roland Barthes' application of this notion to the objects and practices of everyday life where he takes the analysis a step further and invests a further layer of meaning in each sign viz., the mythological meaning or cultural subtext that underlies the primary linguistic meaning. We then discussed the works of John Berger and Judith Williamson to subject advertisements to a productive semiotic analysis to understand how they engage us as individuals in the economy of consumption.

As you can see from the above discussion, visual advertisements play an important role in terms of the cultural representation of gender, and in determining how we as viewers, receive the encoded messages about women's and men's roles in society. Semiotics helps us to critically analyze and deconstruct the hidden messages so that we can become aware of our own participation in this process.

3.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Why is Myth a metalanguage in Roland Barthes? Discuss.
- 2) Explain the Meta referent system of advertisements in Judith Williamson.
- 3) Attempt a semiotic analysis of contemporary toy ads and their gendered perceptions.
- 4) Using the work of John Berger and Judith Williamson, critically analyze any perfume advertisement that you can find in an Indian magazine.
- 5) After reading this unit, do you think we can apply the same semiotic analysis to contemporary Bollywood cinema? Use any one example of a movie to discuss.

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