

Block

2

Ideology, Discourse and Gender

Unit-4

Semiotics and Structuralist Theory

57

Unit-5

Bakhtin's Carnavalesque

73

Unit-6

Jacques Derrida

88

Unit-7

Michel Foucault

106

Block 2: Ideology, Discourse and Gender

Introduction

In this block we will study the major critical theorists of the twentieth century: Althusser, Bakhtin, Derrida and Foucault and understand and critique them from the perspective of postmodernism and gender.

In literature the term postmodern was used systematically in the 1970s by Ihab Hassan. For Hassan, postmodernism has been with us for a long time. But it is important to note that postmodernism and postmodernity are not necessarily identical. The latter is a more inclusive historical term implying the end of a cycle that began with the European Renaissance. Postmodernism, on the other hand, suggests a contemporary cultural phenomenon. The problematic of postmodernism is how to understand and constitute self, knowledge, social relations and cultural change without resorting to Enlightenment strategies of linearity, hierarchy and binary ways of thinking and being.

Feminism has been an enabling mechanism for postmodernism instead of the other way around. Feminism's assertion of difference, its refusal of totalizing meta(master) narratives and above all its critiques of the structures of power involved in representation, have all contributed to the postmodern phenomenon. Postmodernism in turn provides feminism with an additional framework enabling it to articulate the diversity and contradictions that spring up not only between various positions but also within various positions.

The postmodern attack against the "Enlightenment" at one level suits the feminists because in many ways "women" were never part of the "Enlightenment" project. That discourse was not meant to include women. Feminists are particularly happy with the attack of postmodernism on history and the recovery of other voices, because women were never given the status of historical subjects. The demand of postmodernism to allow other voices to speak has allowed women to be visibilised.

Critics like Alice Jardine argue that feminists should be a little wary in getting on to the band wagon on postmodernism. She states that in re- conceptualizing the master narratives, postmodernism with its stress on non-linearity and fragmentation will destroy the women's movement. Most importantly, postmodern narratives about subjectivity are inadequate for women. This is because postmodern narratives construct subjectivities in such a way that only two alternatives are possible: One, a false, unitary and essential self and two, a non-differentiated historically constituted "true" self. Feminists argue that these positions deny women other alternatives such as mother-child pre-natal bonding etc. In other words though Postmodernism makes important contributions in undermining faulty ideas about self, knowledge, power etc it is still inadequate in its treatment of gender. We will discuss and explore these ideas in the units of this book.

We hope your understanding of the theorists discussed in this block (Althusser, Bakhtin, Derrida and Foucault) will enable you to approach literary texts in a more critical manner, while using a gender perspective to do so.

UNIT 4 Semiotics and Structuralist Theory

Structure

- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Learning Objectives
- 4.3 Life and Works of Louis Pierre Althusser
- 4.4 Althusser's Basic Ideas and their Literary and Political Contexts
 - 4.4.1 Althusser and Marxism
 - 4.4.2 Althusser and Structuralist Marxism
 - 4.4.3 Relative Autonomy of the Superstructure
 - 4.4.4 Other Influences on Althusser
- 4.5 Althusser's Essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus"
 - 4.5.1 Production and Relations of Reproduction
 - 4.5.2 Three Basic Ideological Concepts
 - 4.5.3 Ideology, State Apparatus and Repressive State Apparatus
- 4.6 Feminists and Althusser
- 4.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.8 Glossary of Althusserian Key Terms
- 4.9 Annotated Bibliography of Althusser's Major Works
- 4.10 Unit End Questions
- 4.11 References
- 4.12 Suggested Readings

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In Unit 1 of the block: Ideology, Discourse and Gender, we will study about the life and works of Louis Pierre Althusser, the French Marxist philosopher. Although we will be studying his essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus" published in his book *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (1971), you are strongly encouraged to read his other works listed in this unit for a good grasp of his theories.

Louis Pierre Althusser was a French Marxist philosopher relatively unknown until the mid 1960s when his works were published: *For Marx* (1965), *Reading Capital* (1968) and *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (1971). He became famous for his revision of traditional Marxism in his understanding of ideology. Moving away from classical Marxism that spoke of the mechanistic base and superstructure dialectics, he spoke of the "relative autonomy" of the superstructure (see section 1.4). Feminists have found his notion of "ideological interpellation" very useful in understanding the operations of patriarchal ideology (See section 1.6).

Throughout his life Althusser suffered from depression. It was during one of these fits of depression that he strangled his wife. There is confusion around the event. Some state he deliberately strangled her while others say it was a mistake. Althusser himself does not remember how it happened. There were no witnesses. In his autobiography, *L'Avenir diure Longtemps*, Althusser states that he used to massage his wife's neck and one day while he was massaging it he pressed the front of her neck. He says, "Yet I knew she had been strangled. But how? I stood up and screamed: 'I've strangled Hélène!'"

Despite these puzzling events in his personal life, Althusser's theories about ideology have held a special appeal to feminists due to his trenchant critiques of the way power and ideology function. In this unit, you will learn about Althusser's theorization of the ideological apparatus and its particular relevance to feminism.

4.2 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completing this unit, you will learn about:

- Familiarising yourself with Louis Althusser's life, works and key terms;
- Basic ideas of Althusser's theories within literary and political contexts;
- The essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus"; and
- Feminist approaches to the essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus".

4.3 LIFE AND WORKS OF LOUIS ALTHUSSER

Of Jewish origin, Louis Althusser was born in 1918, in French Algeria, in a place named Birmandreis, near Algiers, to Charles Althusser and Lucienne Berger. His father was a bank manager. Louis Althusser saw him as an authoritarian figure. Althusser got his name from his paternal uncle who died serving in World War I. He believed that his mother wanted to marry his uncle but due to his death married his father instead. Often, he believed his mother treated him as a replacement for his dead uncle, which he alleges, contributed to deep psychological problems in him. After the demise of his father, Althusser's mother, along with Althusser and his younger sister moved to Marseilles. He spent his childhood here. In 1937 he joined the Jeunesse Etudiante Chrétienne which was a Catholic youth movement. He advocated some of the most conservative ideas of the church during this period.

Althusser performed brilliantly in his school, Lycée du Parc in Lyon, and was admitted in 1939 to Ecole Normale Supérieure. However, due to the Second World War his studies were disrupted. During the German occupation of north and east of France, Althusser was put in a German concentration camp in Schleswig for five years. The Nazi occupation of France made him engage with Marxism. He got involved with the French Resistance against German occupation. It was during this period that he met his future wife, Hélène Rytman, who was an activist in the Resistance movement and married her in 1946. She was eight years older than him and was of Lithuanian- Jewish origin. They were very compatible as partners. Rytman was a member of the French Communist Party (FCP). Althusser also joined the party in 1948 and continued to be its member until his death. After the Second World War Althusser returned to

Ecole Normale Supérieure and worked on his Master's thesis on the German philosopher, G.W. Hegel. Althusser had learnt German while he was in the concentration camp in Germany.

It was during his stay in the concentration camp that Althusser developed physical and mental disorders that were to stay with him until his death. In 1947 Althusser went in for mental therapy. He completed his work on Hegel the same year and was offered the position of a tutor at Ecole Normale Supérieure.

Althusser suffered from depression throughout his life. During the student revolts of the 1960s, Althusser was in a sanatorium recovering from depression. In any case, Althusser was silent on the issue of the 1968 student revolts in France. Later, he stated that it was due to their naive understanding of Marxism that the students got involved with the revolts. He was more interested in the later Marx who was a "scientific-theorist" more than a humanist. This made him unpopular in France and many of his supporters turned against him. However, he revised some of his earlier positions in his subsequent works.

During the period 1947 - 1980 Althusser had at least 15 bouts of depression. It was during one such period of depression that he killed his wife in 1980. Althusser was confined to Sainte-Anne psychiatric institution from 1980- 1983. After being discharged from the hospital he moved to Northern Paris where he saw few people and basically lived the life of a recluse. He spent the last ten years of his life in and out of sanatoriums although he continued with his writings. He died of a heart attack in 1990 at the age of 72 in Yvelines, France. His unfinished work on Ideology was effectively continued by his student Michel Foucault. During the last period of his life he wrote two autobiographies although they are not to be seen as completely factual: *Les Faits* and *L'Avenir Dure Longtemps*. This last was published in America as *The Future Lasts Forever* in which he describes the killing of his wife.

4.4 ALTHUSSER'S BASIC IDEAS AND THEIR LITERARY AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Althusser was a Marxist but unlike most left thinkers who focussed on Marx's early works, he moved on to the later Marx who was more of a "Scientific-theorist" and had moved away from his early humanism that was the influence of Feuerbach and Hegel. For him there was a radical "epistemological break" in Marx from 1845 onwards. Let us now look at Althusser in the context of Marxism.

4.4.1 Althusser and Marxism

It is important to understand the background against which Althusser's anti-humanism has to be understood. The Twentieth Party Congress of the Soviet Union started the process of de-Stalinization and was moving towards a humanistic Marxism in 1956. Nikita Khrushchev in her "Secret Speech" talked about the personality cult of Stalin and his dictatorial ways. These Marxists were looking for more humane alternatives to counter the Stalinism of the Soviet and also the Maoist brand of Marxism that was emerging in China. Many of the leaders from the Communist Party of France (PCF) were involved in the opening of dialogue among the various groups that included Socialists, Christians and Existentialists among others.

Althusser did not want to align himself with them. He labelled himself as an “anti-humanist.” He saw Marxism as a science of society: “I should add that, just as the foundation of mathematics by Thales ‘induced’ the birth of the Platonic philosophy, just as the foundation of physics by Galileo ‘induced’ the birth of Cartesian philosophy, etc., so the foundation of the science of history by Marx has ‘induced’ the birth of a new, theoretically and practically revolutionary philosophy, Marxist philosophy or dialectical materialism” (Althusser, 1979, p. 14). He felt that Marxists had not paid attention to Marx’s scientific approach to an understanding of history (“historical materialism”) in which he advocated a radical view of social change. In fact, Althusser states that Marx himself was not fully aware of it. Althusser wanted to re-read Marx and expand his theories to go beyond humanistic interpretations.

4.4.2 Althusser and Structuralist Marxism

Structuralists do not see individual experiences as being determined outside the forces of the structures of society. Althusser too believed in structures affecting individuals. He wanted to show how individual acts were already influenced by the dominant ideology of the state. The individuals were “always-already” in performing their individual acts. In other words, individual acts were not carried out as the result of free will or agency, but were always and already dependent upon, and part of, larger social structures and influences. Like Marx, he believed that individual agency was subsumed by historical processes and history itself was seen as a “process without a subject” (1971, p. 167). In this Althusser extended Marx’s remark in *The German Ideology* where he said: “Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology...have no history, no development” (Marx & Engels 1932, p.6).

Althusser advocated a non-teleological view of history. That is, he did not believe in a unilinear notion of history that progressively develops towards an end or goal (Greek word, *telos*). At any given point the social formation of a society is influenced by the Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses (see section 1.5) which emerge from the dominant mode of production. These social formations change depending on the mode of production and in the interest of those in power. His first articles on the subject were published in *For Marx* (1979). Many regard this book as the basic text of Structuralist Marxism. But, unlike the Structuralists, Althusser’s was not a language based philosophy. For him, the economic structure and its mode of production, were instrumental in social formations. It is because of this viewpoint that Althusser was called a Marxist Structuralist.

4.4.3 Relative Autonomy of the Superstructure

Althusser pushed Marxism beyond its earlier theoretical positions (also acknowledged by Marx and Engels) by challenging some of its assumptions. For instance, he moves beyond Marxism and argues that the structures of society were not related to the economic base of society alone. There is the additional factor of the problem of social reproduction, which has an impact on the social structures. This “social temporality” is supplied by the Ideological State Apparatus or the ISAs. Althusser believed that rather than understanding social structures from bottom upwards through economic determination alone that affected the political, social and religious structures at the superstructural level, he spoke of how ideology had a role to play in social formations. He used the idea of “interlocking.” For him, the superstructure had relative autonomy.

The desires, decisions and preferences an individual makes were the influences of social practices, which in turn were related to the social formation of a period that moulded a person in its own image. Society imposes a role (forme) on the individual as a subject. By introducing these ideas and interrogating some Marxist assumptions, Althusser brought a refreshing elaboration of Marxist theory to give it a new direction.

4.4.4 Other Influences on Althusser

Apart from the structuralists, Freud, Lacan and Hegel also influenced Althusser in different ways. Like Marx, Althusser, was influenced in his theory of ideology by Freud and Lacan. Capitalism, he argues, gives the impression that we are free individuals who make our own choices. But, according to Althusser, our preferences, choices, desires (to name three among others) are a product of social practices in society that we have internalized. Society wants to mould us in its own image. It imposes a role (forme) on the individual as a subject.

Based on his reading of Freud and Lacan, he developed an understanding of the deeper structures that exist beneath the surface of the text. In his essay, 'Freud and Lacan' (1994) Althusser discusses this idea. Although Marx was seen as being indebted to Hegel, Althusser tried to argue that he was anti-Hegelian. Althusser points out that Hegel's dialectics of the world view was essentially realized in terms of the "Absolute Spirit." This is unlike Marx, for whom the dialectics of the world view was overdetermined by the economic base. Althusser argues that Marx's approach to history as a "process without a subject," transformed Hegel's notion of history as evolving and being governed by the concept of the Spirit.

Althusser's Influence on Theorists

Althusser's works have held a great influence over other scholars. Several theorists such as Etienne Balibar (who was his student), Pierre Macherey, Jacques Derrida (whom he knew personally), Michel Foucault (who like Balibar was his student), Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton have been influenced by Althusser's notion of ideology. Feminist theorists like Juliet Mitchell and Michelle Barrett have also used his ideas of "interpellation" to understand the workings of patriarchy. We will discuss this in Section 1.6 of this unit.

Check Your Progress:

- i) Why were individuals "always-already" for Althusser?

- ii) Why was Althusser labelled a structuralist?

- iii) Distinguish between Althusser and Marx in their understanding of the relations between base and superstructure?

iv) Name three of the famous theorists associated with Althusser:
a)
b)
c)

4.5 ALTHUSSER’S ESSAY, “IDEOLOGY AND IDEOLOGICAL STATE APPARATUS”

Althusser’s essay, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Toward an Investigation*, has been seminal in contributing to a broader understanding of Ideology. This essay was part of a larger project but Althusser was unable to complete it due to his bouts of depression and subsequent hospitalizations. The essay was published later in *Lenin And Philosophy and Other Essays*. While acknowledging Marx for his “discovery of human history: the discovery that opens for men the way to a scientific (materialist and dialectical) understanding of their own history as a history of the class struggle” (Althusser, 2006, p. xv), he nevertheless moves beyond Marx in his understanding of Ideology. The ideas in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Toward an Investigation* have had an impact of feminists critics in their understanding of the workings of patriarchal ideology. This will be discussed separately in Section 1.6 of this unit.

4.5.1 Production and Relations of Reproduction

Althusser’s essay, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Toward an Investigation*, basically conceives of the subject not as an autonomous being but as mediated by his/her social formation. Broadly speaking, Althusser speaks of a distinct concept of social formation which relates to the dialectics of the economic base and the political and the ideological superstructures. These different levels have a capacity to influence one other. But, it is the economic base that “determines in the last instance” the political and ideological levels even as it is “overdetermined” by them (2006, p. 86). It is in this sense that Althusser speaks of the “relative autonomy” of the political and ideological levels. In other words, these levels are relatively independent but in the ultimate analysis they are determined by the economic base.

For Althusser, like for Marx, every social formation arises from a dominant mode of production. Karl Marx in Volume 2 of *Das Kapital* had stated that no production is possible without it reproducing the material conditions of its own production. But what is “the reproduction of the conditions of production?” (Althusser, 2006, p. 86). He states that “in order to exist, every social formation must reproduce the conditions of its production at the same time as it produces” (Althusser, 2006, p. 86). But in order to be able to produce one has to reproduce:

- i) the productive forces; and
- ii) the existing relations of production.

Let us take the first, that is, productive forces: here, Althusser distinguishes between reproduction of the means of production and the reproduction of the productive forces. The latter, for him, is linked to the reproduction of labour power. How is this labour ensured? One way, as Marx had stated, is to provide labour with the material conditions to reproduce itself viz. food, shelter,

clothing etc. But reproducing labour power alone is not enough. What is needed, Althusser states, is diversified skilled labour that is competent for “a complex system of the process of production” (2006, p. 88). How is this provided for in capitalism? He argues that during slavery and serfdom, the skill is acquired “on the spot” through trial and error and experience. Under capitalism this is not the case. It is “achieved more and more outside production: by the capitalist education system, and by other instances and institutions” by which he means the Church, and other “apparatuses like the Army” (Althusser, 1971, p.132).

The education system, according to Althusser, not only teaches children knowledge in their different disciplines but it also teaches them “proper” rules of society. That is, how to conduct themselves without crossing boundaries and learning to respect the job divisions in society, which “actually means rules of respect for the socio-technical division of labour and ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination” (Althusser, 1971, p. 132). The point Althusser makes is that the reproduction of labour power includes not only reproduction of its skills but also a “submission to the rules of the established order” (Althusser, 1971, p. 132). This allows for the ruling ideology to manipulate and exploit the workers. It is “in the forms and under the forms of ideological subjection that provision is made for the reproduction of the skills of labour power” (Althusser, 1971, p. 132). What has to be recognized, Althusser says, is the presence of a new reality: Ideology; that comes under “relations of reproduction”. Althusser states, that this aspect has been uniquely ignored remove the quotes from the last two words (2006, p. 89). In the Marxist tradition there is a “reciprocal action” between the superstructure and the base. He conceives of it as a building with different floors. The foundation of the building is the economic base. Althusser says the biggest disadvantage of Marxists in using the metaphor of the edifice in discussing society is that it makes it “descriptive.” He argues we have to go beyond descriptive category to a theoretical one. The former category for him is a transitional phase that is a necessary condition for the development of theory. This is what he elaborates in his essay. Ideology, for him, is the site where class struggles take place between the exploited and exploiting classes.

4.5.2 Three Basic Ideological Concepts

There are three basic concepts in Althusser’s understanding of ideology.

- i) “Ideology is the ‘representation’ of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser, 2006, p. 109).

For Althusser it is impossible to escape ideology. One is subjected to it. He states that “Ideology has a material existence” (2006, p.112). Different ideologies like religion, legal, political etc. constitute different world views. “Assuming we are not living in all these ideologies the ‘world outlooks’ become imaginary. But even if they don’t correspond to reality (illusion) they allude to it (allusion)”. But he states, “it is not their real conditions of existence, their real world, that ‘men’ ‘represent to themselves’ in ideology, but above all it is their relation to those conditions of existence which is represented to them there” (Althusser, 1971, p.164).

ii) **Materiality of Ideology:**

The second aspect concerns the materiality of ideology. Althusser states that ideology has a material existence. That is “an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material” (Althusser, 1971, p.166). Ideology is not just a set of ideas but it has a materiality in that the actions and decisions made by the individual are a result of his/her ideological socialization and orientation. In this regards, Althusser states:

Box No. 1.1

I shall therefore say that, where only a single subject (such and such individual) is concerned, the existence of the ideas of his belief is material in that his ideas are his material actions inserted into his material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which we derive the ideas of that subject...Ideas have disappeared as such (insofar as they are endowed with an ideal or spiritual existence), to the precise extent that it has emerged that their existence is inscribed in the actions of practices governed by rituals defined in the last instance by an ideological apparatus. It therefore appears that the subject acts insofar as he is acted by the following system (set out in the order of its real determination): ideology existing in a material ideological apparatus, describing material practices governed by a material ritual, which practices exist in the material actions of a subject acting in all consciousness according to his belief.

(Althusser, 1971, p.169-170)

iii) **“Ideology interpellates individuals as subjects”**

Althusser makes a distinction between the individual and the subject. It is ideology that changes the former into the latter. He says, “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects” (Althusser, 1971, p.173). He gives the example of the police hailing an individual as “Hey, you there!” In responding to this call, the individual will turn around and in this process he “becomes a subject.” “Why? because he has recognized that the hail was ‘really’ addressed to him, and that ‘it was really him who was hailed”” (Althusser, 1971, p.172-174). In this sense, the individual is “always-already” a subject. But, there is also another process involved in creating the subject. He gives the example from Christianity and its religious ideology. In this world view there is one Supreme Subject and several ordinary subjects. The ideology here presupposes a central Supreme Being in whose name other individuals are transformed into subjects. The human individual accepts and carries out rituals as a free subject without questioning the “interpellating ideology.” As he states “the subject recognizes itself as subject only because it subjects itself to the central Absolute Subject, which provides the possibility of this recognition, and circumscribes the forms of subjection in which the subject is constituted” (2006, p. 122). The human individual accepts and carries out rituals as a free subject without questioning the “interpellating ideology.” What is interesting is the fact that the subject sees its subjecthood as natural but it is this naturalness that Althusser states is the role played by ideology. There is a double bind here. That is, in order to be a subject who feels free one has to ironically enough subject oneself to the “Absolute Subject.”

4.5.3 Ideology, State Apparatus and Repressive State Apparatus

Althusser is very particular about pointing to the role of ideology in enabling the ruling classes to use the state in its domination over the working classes. In the Marxist tradition, Althusser states, the State is seen as a repressive apparatus that enables the ruling class to continue with their domination over the working class. This enables “the former to subject the latter to the process of surplus-value extortion” (Althusser, 1971, p. 135).

Marx distinguishes between State power and State apparatus. The latter may survive even if the former is ousted. He gives the example of what happened after the socialist revolution in Russia in 1917. Although the state power was seized by the peasantry and the proletariat alliance, the state apparatus survived. Here, let us examine Althusser’s cogent summary of “The Marxist Theory of the State”:

To summarize the “Marxist theory of the State” it can be said that the Marxist classics have always claimed that a) the State is the repressive State apparatus, b) State power and State apparatus must be distinguished, c) the objective of the class struggle concerns State power, and in consequence the use of the State apparatus by the classes (or alliances of classes or of fractions of classes) holding State power as a function of their class objectives, and d) the proletariat must seize State power in order to destroy the existing bourgeois State apparatus and, in a first phase, replace it with a quite different, proletarian, State apparatus, “then in later phases set in motion a radical process, that of the destruction of the State (the end of State power, the end of every State apparatus)” (Althusser, 1971, p. 141).

Althusser states that in Marxist theory, the State Apparatus constitutes the government, the administrations, the army the plice, the courts, the prisons. To the Marxists, the State Apparatus functions by violence. Althusser states that something else has to be added to the Marxist theory of the State. Apart from taking into account state power and state apparatus another reality has to be taken into account. This reality, he calls the ideological state apparatuses (2006).

What constitutes the ideological state apparatus? He says that there are a certain number of realities that form “distinct and specialized institutions.” He gives some examples of these:

- i) The religious ISA (Churches and other such bodies / institutions)
- ii) The educational ISA (this refers to public and private schools)
- iii) The family ISA
- iv) The legal ISA. (This, Althusser states, belongs to both the RSA and the ISA)
- v) The political ISA (includes different political systems, parties etc).
- vi) The trade union ISA
- vii) The communication ISA (this would include the media, press, television etc.)
- viii) The cultural ISA (literature, arts, sports)

However, Althusser states that we should not confuse the Ideological State Apparatus with the Repressive State Apparatus. He distinguishes between them in the following ways:

- a) If there is one Repressive State Apparatus that is the STATE, there is a “plurality of Ideological State Apparatuses” (Althusser, 2006, p. 100).
- b) The RSA belongs to the public domain but the ISA to the private (family, schools, churches etc.).
- c) The RSA functions by violence. It uses law and the court initially against people or groups who threaten the dominant rule of ideology and if things are not contained to incarceration and police force and eventually the army itself.
- d) It is important to note that both RSA and ISA have ideology but the main difference between the two is that the RSA functions “massively and predominantly by repression (including physical repression), while functioning secondarily by ideology” (Althusser, 2006, p. 101). That is, the army and the police are ideologically influenced to perpetuate and reproduce the values they represent. Similarly, the ISA functions basically as ideology and only secondarily by repression “this is very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic” (2006, p. 101). For example, schools and churches have their own methods of punishment for those who disobey.
- e) Whereas the RSA “constitutes an organized whole” controlled by those in power, the ISA is “multiple, distinct, relatively autonomous and capable of providing an objective field to contradictions which express, in forms which may be limited or extreme, the effects of the clashes between the capitalist class struggle and the proletarian class struggle, as well as their subordinate forms” (Althusser, 1971, p. 143-144).

Check Your Progress:

i) What are the differences between ISA and RSA?

ii) What constitutes the ISA? What is the most important ISA?

iii) What constitutes the RSA?

Althusser goes on to explain that although there are a plurality of ISAs, there is one thing that binds them together despite their contradiction and that is the ideology of “the ruling class.” He argues that since the state power is held by the ruling class, both ISA and RSA are at their disposal. The ruling class uses it to reproduce and maintain their power. He gives the example of how concerned Lenin was after the revolution to change the educational ideological apparatus so that the proletariat who had taken over state power could retain it.

During ‘serfdom’ and its social formation what was dominant was the feudal mode of production. It had a single repressive state apparatus: absolute monarchy. The ISA too existed but at a smaller scale. The Church, for example, covered a lot of functions: cultural, educational etc. But these became independent over a period of time. In the capitalist social formations the school/family units have replaced the church /family units.

The reason why the educational State apparatus is important is because it contributes to the “relations of production” that is, “of capitalist relations of exploitation” (2006, p.101). Of course other ISAs like press, religion, family and culture also contribute variously to support the ruling ideology by instilling into individuals loyalty, patriotism, liberalism to name just three. But it is education within capitalism which is the most important ISA. It teaches children in school to be knowledgeable in the know-how of the ruling ideology. All of them, by the time they leave school are ready to maintain the relations of production in their society through their various roles as adults in society.

Althusser calls the ideological state apparatus “the site of class struggle” that is, ideology becomes the ground in which conflicting interests of the exploited and exploiting classes are embattled for supremacy. In this sense, the ideological territory is occupied either by the ruling class or by a new revolutionary class. He says:

It is only from the point of view of the classes, i.e., of the class struggle, that it is possible to explain the ideologies existing in a social formation. Not only is it from this starting-point that it is possible to explain the realization of the ruling ideology in the ISAs and of the forms of class struggle for which the ISAs are the seat and the stake. But it is also and above all from this starting-point that it is possible to understand the provenance of the ideologies, which are realized in the ISAs and confront one another there. For it is true that the ISAs represent the form in which the ideology of the ruling class must necessarily be measured and confronted, ideologies are not ‘born’ in the ISAs but from the social classes at grips in the class struggle: from their conditions of existence, their practices, their experience of the struggle, etc.

(Althusser, 1971, p. 185).

So far, we have examined Althusser’s understanding of ideology in terms of how it plays out in the form of social repression and even exploitation. What relationship do Althusser’s ideas have with feminist notions of class struggle and subjectivity which we have addressed in previous courses? Let us turn to this in the next section.

Check Your Progress:

i) Why is the educational system one of the most important ISA?

ii) What is the difference between State apparatus and State power?

iii) What are the two important processes that ideologically interpellate individual as subjects?

4.6 FEMINISM AND ALTHUSSER

There is a basic debate in Feminism between the Humanists and the anti-Humanists regarding women's subjectivity. Whereas the former speaks of the term 'subject' in relation to women as individuals, the latter speaks of it in more generalized terms.

Mary Eagleton, in her essay, "Finding the Subject" (2000), makes the distinctions clearly between these two approaches, "The actual term 'subject' is usually employed by the anti-humanist position; the humanist position tends to refer to 'identity' or 'the individual'" (Eagleton, 2000, p.189). We can infer that, Althusser, because of his interest in the later Marx's "Scientific- approach" was anti-humanist.

Humanists argue that women under patriarchy are represented in false and stereotypical ways. This makes it difficult for women to relate to the images used to represent them. What they would like to do is to create their sense of self and identity based on their individual experiences. The anti-Humanist wing, in its understanding of the subject, is influenced by theoretical discourses. They believe that there is no single self but multiple selves. Subjectivity, for them, is in process and not complete. They also argue that the subject does not create the world but is a product of it. Feminists from the anti-humanists group draw upon the theoretical discourses of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theories, Louis Althusser's theories of ideology, the discourse theory of Michel Foucault and post-structuralist thoughts in relation to language, as elaborated upon by Jacques Derrida.

Despite Althusser's "anti-humanist" stance, many feminists were drawn to his essay on Ideology. In this section we will focus on a feminist approach to Louis Althusser's theory of ideology. But before we do this, let us point out the problems with Marxism that feminists, who were Marxists, had with this ideology. Marxist feminists believe that traditional Marxism tended to erase gender in favour of class. Marxism with its definitive approach to societal transformation through class struggles reduced the issue of gender into a subcategory by subsuming women within class relations, labour process and the functioning of the state. Besides, women, irrespective of nationalities, were put together as a homogenized group. The Marxist feminists were trying to argue that women, regardless of class, were oppressed by patriarchy and the specificity of women's situation varied and could not be generalized. Postmodern and poststructuralist theories with their shifting, deconstructive and mutable approaches have helped resolve some of these contradictions.

The debate between theory and practice so central to Marxist theory has also been foregrounded by some feminists. Annette Kuhn and Ann Marie Wolpe say this is "precisely because it has been one of the projects of the movement to construct knowledge of the nature and causes of our oppression, with a view to changing that situation" (Kuhn and Wolpe, 1978, p.6). The idea was to shun universalism and move towards material, historical specificity. For Marxist

feminists, such as Gayatri C. Spivak, this involved an understanding of the historical concreteness of a mode of production without losing the perspective on gender.

Michelle Barrett, in her essay, "Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender" states that the concept of ideology has not been adequately tackled by Marxist feminists. This is partly because ideology has not been theorised well by Marxism or feminism. She points out that several feminists have talked about the centrality of ideology in women's oppression but this centrality has never been analysed. This is seen best in literature. Many feminists have put in much work in the field of literature but little is written as to why literature is the chosen field. Nor are the links between literature and family made. Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf, Barrett says, tried to some extent to do this but this is not the case with contemporary feminism.

Barrett states that Althusser offers an analysis of ideology for feminists that traditional Marxism denied. She argues that as long as feminist theories of ideology work with a theory of representation, it is problematic, because representation is always a reflection of reality, which in itself is a set of "socially constructed" categories. She says that classical theories of representation should be rejected. Marxists see representation as a reflection of specific historical conditions. Representation is usually seen as ideology and explored through cultural products. Barrett argues that although means of representation are important they do not themselves account for what is represented.

Marxist feminists found that a reliance on the traditional Marxist base-superstructure mechanistic view of social totality, or, the Hegelian view of the social whole was inadequate from their perspective. Rather, it was Althusser's concept of the social formation with its distinct levels that compose the economic base and the political and ideological superstructures that enabled them to understand the workings of patriarchy. Marxist feminists, like Juliet Mitchell, have used Althusser's notion of "relative autonomy" for an understanding of patriarchy. Even though, Althusser like Marx believed that it was the economic in "the last instance" that determines the political and the ideological, these systems still had "relative autonomy."

Feminists were drawn towards Althusser's explanation of ideology. For him, ideology was not just something that floated in the realm of ideas but it had a material basis. It is inscribed within social relations that in turn influence us as individuals. Althusser states, "ideology interpellates individuals as subjects" (see previous sections). These forms of subjection are accepted by the subject in such a way that this recognition of being a subject appears to be an obvious and natural fact. Althusser points out that this natural fact is the effect of ideology. Marxist feminists like Mitchell and Barrett feel that this is how patriarchy has been naturalized and influenced subject formations. In other words, women are forced into seeing their oppression and marginalization as something 'natural' rather than as the result of a repressive patriarchal ideology. Feminists have worked towards making visible the hidden levels at which this ideology pervades culture so that women can begin to interrogate given subjectivities and explore new ones.

Agreeing with Althusser that ideology in general, like the unconscious, is both omnipresent and eternal, Barrett and Mitchell state that patriarchy and patriarchal relations are located within the unconscious. Juliet Mitchell in

her book, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* states how Freud's concepts of the unconscious and psychic representation can be used to understand women's oppression within historical materialism with its specific mode of production rather than see it as an ahistorical, universalized process.

In the above discussion, we have primarily focused on one particular essay by Althusser, and its influence on feminism. In Section 1.9 below, we have provided you with an annotated bibliography of some of Althusser's major works, which is intended to give you a wider understanding of his contributions. You will find it helpful, for your understanding of Althusser, to read some of these works on your own.

Check Your Progress:

List some points to show why Althusser was important to Feminists

4.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have discussed Althusser's life, the influences on him and the works that he wrote. We have located these works along with his basic ideas in their literary and political contexts. Our main thrust in this unit was to discuss Althusser's essay on Ideology. We have highlighted the main point of this essay by defining the roles played by the ISA and the RSA. Further, we have tried to show how feminists responded to this essay. That is, how they used his notion of "ideological interpellation" to critique the ideology of patriarchy. The glossary of key Althusserian terms the annotated bibliography will be helpful for you in deepening your understanding of Althusser's theoretical viewpoints.

4.8 GLOSSARY OF ALTHUSSERIAN KEY TERMS

Interpellation : At a very basic level the term refers to a form of ideological mediation. But for Althusser this mediation is a complex process. It refers to the subject's complicity in being subjugated by the dominant ideology.

Ideology : Althusser, like Marx, was influenced in his theory of ideology by Freud and Lacan. Capitalism, he argues, gives the impression that we are free individuals who make our choices but for him our preferences, choices, desires (to name three among others) are a product of social practices in society that we have internalized. Society wants to mould us in its own image. Althusser's essay, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Toward an Investigation* basically conceives of the subject not as an autonomous being but as mediated by his/her social formation. He makes a distinction between the individual and the subject. It is ideology that changes the former into the latter.

Ideological State : The ISA are a certain number of realities that Apparatus form "distinct and specialized institutions". These include

among others the education system, the family, religious institutions and the legal system.

Repressive State : The RSA belongs to the public domain like the Apparatus police, the army, prisons etc. They are controlled by those in power and the RSA functions by violence.

4.9 ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF MAJOR WORKS BY ALTHUSSER

Reading Capital: This was a product of a seminar held in 1965 by Althusser and his students on Karl Marx' *Das Kapital* (1970). It challenges some of the concepts of Marxist philosophy and theory. For example, the Marxist notion of history as being teleological, that is, moving in one direction progressively towards a goal, was questioned. The English translation has essays by Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar. The original French version had essays by several of Althusser's other students. Many consider the book as an important moment in the history of post structuralism.

For Marx: This book which was written in French in 1965 and has been translated by Ben Brewster in 1969 has seven essays. The essays address the political debate of the period when people had begun to see the distortions of Marxism by Stalinist communist parties. In this period people were moving towards the early humanist Marx that highlighted how the relationship between humans and nature and humans and humans had been ruined by capitalism that dehumanized people. Althusser was against this humanistic trend of the time. He argued that Marx himself had rejected his early humanism. Althusser was more interested in the structure of society rather than the people. The latter, for him, were subsumed by the dominant ideology and become products of social structures.

Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays: The work published in 1971 covers Althusser's interest in philosophy, aesthetics, sociology, politics among others. The book is known for the essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" which broadened Marxist theories on ideology. Many Marxist critics have been influenced by this work and have re-worked Marxist ideas.

4.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) How does Althusser broaden Marx's notion of ideology?
- 2) Althusser states, in order to exist, every social formation must reproduce the conditions of its production at the same time as it produces" Discuss.
- 3) How does Marxist theory conceive of the State? Discuss.
- 4) What does Althusser mean by the "materiality of ideology?" Why does Barrett contest the notion of "materiality of ideology"? Explain.
- 5)
 - a) What are the problems that Feminists have with traditional Marxism?
 - b) How has Marxism helped women to understand their subjugated position in society?

4.11 REFERENCES

- Althusser, L. (1970). *Reading Capital*. London: NLB.
- Althusser, L. (1971). *Lenin before Hegel*. London: New Left Books.
- Althusser, L. (1979). *For Marx*. (Trans.) Ben Brewster. London: Verso.
- Althusser, L. (2006). *Ideology and Ideology State Apparatuses : Notes towards an Investigation*. In *Lenin And Philosophy And Other Essays*. Delhi: Aakar Books.
- Anderson, P. (1976). *Considerations on Western Marxism*. London: New Left Books.
- Bennett, T. (1979). *Formalism and Marxism*. NY: Methuen & Co. Ltd.
- Callinicos, A. (1976). (Ed.). *Althusser's Marxism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Eagleton, M. (2000). *Finding the Subject*. In *Working With Feminist Criticism*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers.
- Elisabeth, R. (2008). *Philosophy in Turbulent Times: Canguilhem, Sartre, Foucault, Althusser, Deleuze, Derrida*. New York : Columbia University Press.
- Elliott, G. (2009). *Althusser: The Detour of Theory*. New York: Verso.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. & Sprinker, M. (1993). (Eds). *The Althusser Legacy*. London: Verso.
- Kuhn & Wolpe. (1978). (Eds). *Feminism and Materialism: Women and Modes of Production*. London & New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Marx, Karl & Friedrich Engels (1932). *The German Ideology*. Moscow: Marx Engels Institute.
- Michelle, B. (1980). *Women's Oppression Today*. London: Verso.

4.12 SUGGESTED READINGS

- Bourdin, Jean-Claude (2000). *The Uncertain Materialism of Louis Althusser*. *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 22 (1), 271–287.
- Étienne, B. (1994). *Althusser's object*. *Social Text*, 39, 157–188.
- Resch, Robert P. (1992). *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Steven, S. (1984). *Reading Althusser: an Essay on Structural Marxism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

UNIT 5 BAKHTIN'S CARNIVALESQUE

Structure

- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Learning Outcomes
- 5.3 Background
- 5.4 Life and Works of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin
- 5.5 Bakhtin's Rabelais and His World
 - 5.5.1 Literary Context
 - 5.5.2 Political Context
- 5.6 Bakhtin's Idea of the Carnivalesque
- 5.7 Gendered Reading of Bakhtin's Idea of the Carnivalesque
- 5.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.9 Glossary of Bakhtinian Key Terms
- 5.10 Bakhtin's Annotated Bibliography of Major Works
- 5.11 Unit End Questions
- 5.12 References
- 5.13 Suggested Readings

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, you read about the contributions of Althusser. In this unit, we will examine the work of another very important postmodern theorist, Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin. Specifically, we will study Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque, based on his famous essay, "Of Carnival and Carnivalesque". As you will see, Bakhtin proposes the idea of the carnivalesque as a subversive force which can help to upset social hierarchies. However, to what extent is this universally applicable? The discussion which follows will enable us to examine this question from a gender perspective.

5.2 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completing this unit, you will learn about:

- A brief account of the Life, Works of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin's and some key terms associated with him;
- Rabelais and his World within its literary and political contexts;
- The idea of the Carnivalesque; and
- The Carnivalesque from a gendered perspective.

5.3 BACKGROUND

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975) is known as a philosopher, literary theorist and semiotician among others. His works have influenced writers from different traditions such as Marxism, Feminism and Structuralism, to name three. Although the Bakhtin Circle was established in 1920 and well known literary figures like Valentin Voloshinov and Medvedev were part of the group that discussed various subjects ranging from aesthetic and art, Bakhtin was re-discovered by Russian scholars only in the 1960s.

Bakhtin's works and ideas gained popularity after his death. Much of what he wrote was initially shrouded in controversy. This was partly because of the limited access to the Russian archives for Bakhtin scholars. However, after the archives opened up, scholars obtained information that gave a new dimension to his works.

Bakhtin was re-discovered by Russian scholars only in the 1960s. There were several reasons for this late discovery of Bakhtin's works. According to Holquist (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 1975), Bakhtin's most productive periods coincided with the two darkest phases of Russian history. The first was after the Russian Revolution of 1917, which followed the civil war and famine when the country was still recovering from its losses in the world war. The second was in the 1930s, when Stalin was attempting to centralize power and purges were being conducted. This, of course, was followed by the Second World War and the fight against Nazism and Fascism. Bakhtin's notions of polyphony, dialogism and heteroglossia, which we will read about in the upcoming sections, would be seen as very dangerous in such a political climate.

Many of Bakhtin's works were written much earlier and published later. While some were published after his death, others were either lost or had issues of dubious authorship. In 1971 when a conference was held to celebrate Bakhtin's 75th birthday, claims were made by the well known Soviet linguist,

V.V. Ivanov that the works attributed to Voloshinov and Medvedev were mainly written by Bakhtin himself. In fact, when Bakhtin was asked whether he was the author of the books attributed to Voloshinov viz. *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique* (1927), *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929) and Medvedev's *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (1928) he was not forthcoming in his response. This is why the debate is still inconclusive and the texts are still considered to be disputed. Bakhtin's re-discovery in the 1960s happened in an interesting way. Students at the Gorky Institute came across his book on Dostoevsky (*Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, 1984a) and his dissertation on Rabelais that they found in the archives. They assumed he was dead and were surprised to learn that he was still around. They decided to publish his works. His controversial dissertation on Rabelais was published in 1965. The same year his writings from the 1930s and early 1940s were published as a collection. Bakhtin had become a cult figure even before he died in 1975. French literary critics like Julia Kristeva among others were instrumental in bringing him to the Francophile world. Later, his popularity spread to America and England. They associated him with the Russian Formalists. By the 1980s Bakhtin was one of the most popular Russian critics in the West. Bakhtin's ideas on the potential dynamics of language got him centre stage in the west particularly in the context of the development of structuralist and subsequent deconstructive theories. The most authoritative biography on M.M. Bakhtin is by Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist entitled, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (1984).

5.4 LIFE AND WORKS OF MIKHAIL MIKHAILOVICH BAKHTIN

Bakhtin was born on November 17, 1895 in Orval, Russia, to parents who were part of an old nobility that extended back to the fourteenth century. But the family had lost its wealth by the time Bakhtin was born. Bakhtin's father worked as a bank manager, a job that took him to several cities. Bakhtin spent his early childhood in Orel, Vilnius and Odessa. Many critics state that since these cities were multilingual, Bakhtin was influenced by the dynamic potential of language. While at Odessa he joined the local university in 1913. Later, he joined his brother Nikolai in Petersburg University. At the university, Bakhtin was shaped by German philosophy, which was very popular before the First World War. Neo-Kantianism dominated European academia and Russian universities at that time. Neo-Kantianism was a reaction to the excesses of nineteenth century positivism and empiricism. It did not see human consciousness as a blank sheet on which impressions were formed by the external world. On the contrary, it assumed that the individuals had a consciousness that made them apprehend the world in a certain way. As Simon Dentith says, "But Bakhtin's interest springs not from these general questions in the theory of knowledge (indeed he is consistently hostile to arguments conducted solely in this dimension) but in the particular way that he can modulate this neo-Kantian way of thinking into a way of talking about the relationship between self and other" (Dentith, 1995 p. 11).

After completing his studies in 1918 Bakhtin moved to a small city, Nevel, in Western Russia. He worked there as a school teacher for a couple of years. While at Nevel he tried to write a large volume on the subject of moral philosophy but the volume was never published in its entirety. Later, a part of this work was published as an essay "Art and Responsibility" (Bakhtin, 1990). In 1920 Bakhtin moved to Vitebsk, and a year later, he married Elena Aleksandrovna Okolovich. He had a very good relationship with her. Around 1922, Bakhtin was diagnosed with a bone disease, osteomyelitis, that eventually led to the amputation of his leg in 1938.

In 1924, Bakhtin moved to Leningrad, where he got a position in the Historical Institute. He also provided consulting services to the State Publishing House. It was around this time that he decided to go public with his writings. However, the journal that was to publish his article, "On the Question of the Methodology of Aesthetics in Written Works" closed down. It was published almost half a century later (Clark and Holquist, 1984). The late 1920 and the 1930s were a very productive time for Bakhtin. He wrote several articles and books on the novel. He also wrote his doctoral dissertation on Rabelais during this period. His first major book, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* was published in 1929. He first introduced the concept of dialogism here but soon after this revolutionary book was written he was accused of links with the underground movement of the Russian Orthodox Church. Stalin purged several writers and intellectuals during the early years of his communist rule and Bakhtin too was exiled to Siberia. But due to failing health he was sent for six years to Kazakhstan instead. While at Kazakhstan he was living in a town named Kustanai where he worked as a book keeper. It was around this period that he did some serious writing. His seminal essay, "Discourse in the Novel" was written around this time.

In 1937, he moved to a town named Kimry, which was close to Moscow. It was here that he completed his work on the 18th century German novel, but with the German invasion during the war, the only copy of the manuscript was lost. From 1940, until the time when the Second World War was over, Bakhtin lived in Moscow.

Later, he took up the Chair of General Literature Department at the Mordovian Pedagogical Institute at Saransk. This same institute changed in 1957 from a teachers' college to a University and Bakhtin became the Head of the Department of Russian and World Literature in this university. He retired from the university due to failing health in 1961. By 1967 he moved back to Moscow for medical attention. He had lost his wife by then. He died in Moscow in 1975.

5.5 BAKHTIN'S RABELAIS AND HIS WORLD

In this section, let us examine the literary and political contexts which informed Bakhtin's, *Rabelais and His World* (1968) in order to gain a better understanding of the book.

5.5.1 Literary Context

François Rabelais (1494-1553) was a French writer known for his satire, grotesques and humorous preoccupation with popular festive-forms and its celebration of the lower stratum of society with all its bawdiness and vulgarity. Much of his satires and grotesques picked up on the social and political upheavals of the sixteenth century. Bakhtin saw parallels in his own life with its turbulent national history to the life and times of Rabelais. Holquist states, "he was deeply responsive to the Renaissance because he saw in it an age similar to his own in its revolutionary consequences and its acute sense of one world's death and another world's being born" (Bakhtin, 1984 b, Prologue xv).

François Rabelais's first book, *Pantagruel*, was published in 1532. In this book the author celebrated with great élan the debauched life style of its protagonist, *Pantagruel*, upturning the official culture of the Middle Ages. This book was the first of the *Gargantua* series that was condemned both by the French academics and the Roman Catholic Church for its crass depiction of culture and its dismissal of church rituals respectively.

Bakhtin's book, *Rabelais And His World* was published in 1968. The book contains seven chapters ranging from "Rabelais in the History of Laughter" to "Popular-Festive Forms and Images in Rabelais" and "Rabelais' Images and His Time." Bakhtin does not give a systematic analysis of the novel but draws ideas from it and uses them as an artistic practice by re-contextualizing them. For example, Bakhtin uses Rabelais' idea of "grotesque Realism," which stresses the material and bodily functions of eating, defecating, burping as not mere degradation but as part of a process of death and rebirth. He also draws a distinction between the grotesque and classical bodies and points out the openness of the former with its subversive potential, over the closure of the latter. Both these concepts had a special resonance in authoritarian Stalinist Russia.

Rabelais and His World by Bakhtin can be read at two levels. First, it links with the immediate context of Soviet History and Stalinist centralization of power. Second, it shows the explosion of official history by unofficial history. That is, it refers to the imposition of power from above and the desire to change from below. Bakhtin's interest in folk culture is not an isolated interest. As in the

case of Francois Rabelais who was influenced by the Montpellier school that developed various kinds of laughter, in the 1920s in Russia too, scholars like Zelenkin, Jakobson among others talked of the lower stratum of culture.

5.5.2 Political Context

It is the novel form in particular that Bakhtin explores in his book, *Rabelais And His World*. As Krystyna Pokmorska states "Bakhtin's ideas concerning folk culture, with carnival as its indispensable component, are integral to his theory of art. The inherent features of carnival that he underscores are its emphatic and purposeful 'heteroglossia' and its multiplicity of styles. Thus the carnival principle corresponds to and is indeed a part of the novelistic principle itself" (Bakhtin, 1984 b, Foreword: x). However, it must be understood that in the 1930s in Russia, the government wanted to use the novel form to officially streamline the works of Russian writers. In 1934 the Communist Academy had a conference on the nature of the novel so that it could propagate through it social realism. George Lukacs who was a resident of the Soviet at that time participated in it. The proceedings of the conference were published in 1935 in *The Literary Critic*, which was a major theoretical journal of the time. As Holquist states that it is not by chance that Bakhtin was preoccupied by the novelistic genre in his works particularly since 1934. He adds, "The 'grotesque realism' of which so much is made in this book is a point-by-point inversion of categories used in the thirties to define Socialist Realism" (Holquist in Bakhtin, 1984 b, Prologue, xvii).

It is also relevant to mention here that Anatoly Lunacharsky, who was given the task as the founder of Soviet culture talked about the importance of satire and its links with the carnival. He had written a book called *The Social Role of Laughter* (1930). He saw in laughter a panacea for the common man that would prevent him from revolutions. Bakhtin saw in Lunacharsky's ideas the revolutionary potential of his own idea of the carnival. For Bakhtin, the carnival was "revolution itself."

Given the subversive potential of the book, how did it get published? Bakhtin's notes on Rabelais were put together by him in 1940. While in Moscow he handed in his study to the Gorky Institute of World Literature in order to get a postdoctoral degree. The defense took place only after the War was over. The defense of the dissertation itself was fraught with controversy. One group supported the original manuscript and the other was against it. Finally, the government stepped in and the State Accrediting Bureau gave him not a full doctoral degree but the "candidate's degree" for his dissertation on Rabelais in 1952.

The revolutionary potential of the book can be seen in Bakhtin's words that "the carnival forms present the victory of this future over the past. . . .

The birth of the new...is as indispensable and as inevitable as the death of the old. In the whole of the world and of the people there is no room

for fear. For fear can only enter a part that has been separated from the whole, the dying link torn from the link that is being born" (1984b, p. 256).

Check Your Progress:

i) What are the two levels in which Rabelais and His World can be read?

ii) Why was Bakhtin drawn to the carnival form?

iii) Why was Lunacharsky important for Bakhtin?

5.6 BAKHTIN'S IDEA OF THE CARNIVALESQUE

Bakhtin states that in the middle ages carnival played an important role in the lives of ordinary people. These people had a double sphere of life: the official and the unofficial. The first sphere was governed by the church and the feudal state and the second, was characterized by laughter, parody, songs and reversal of the official system. For him, the clown, the fool and comic rites subvert the official sphere dominated by the church and the state. Robert Stam, states, that the oppressive role of the church against which Bakhtin speaks is double-edged. On the one hand, he is towing the line of Stalin in being anti-clerical. Yet, on the other hand, he is speaking against the Stalinist regime, that is, the Soviet officialdom which was becoming increasingly autocratic and univocal. Terry Eagleton states that Bakhtin pits against Stalinist “official, formalistic and logical authoritarianism” with the explosive politics of the body and the erotic (Eagleton, 1981, p.144).

It is carnival's power to subvert rigid, socially determined hierarchies that attracts Bakhtin to the carnival form. Bakhtin's interest in social carnival is confined to its “determining influence” on literature and literary genres. In Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, he says,

The problem of carnival (in the sense of the sum total of all diverse festivities, rituals and forms, of a carnival type)—its essence, its deep roots in the primordial order and the primordial thinking of man, its development under conditions of class society, its extraordinary life force and its undying fascination—is one of the most complex and most interesting ... What interests us here is essentially only the problem of carnivalization, that is, the determining influence of carnival on literature and more precisely on literary genre. (Bakhtin, 1984a, p.122).

He chooses Rabelais to demonstrate, and expand upon, his views of the carnivalesque because in Rabelais, he claims, we see for the last time the possibility of incorporating into literature the collective, dionysiac impulse to carnival (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. xxi). Since Rabelais, “the grotesque tradition peculiar to the market place and the academic literary tradition have parted ways and can no longer be brought together. ... The link with the essential aspects of being, with the organic system of popular-festive images, has broken. Obscenity has become narrowly sexual, isolated, individual, and has no place in

the new official system of philosophy and imagery” (Rabelais, 1984b, p.109). The history of how this split took place, Bakhtin admits, is complex. But using the transformations in “grotesque realism” and the laughter emanating from it as important indexes, Bakhtin attempts to explain this severance in his discussion of Rabelais.

The essential principle of “grotesque realism,” Bakhtin asserts, is “degradation,” that is, de-grading or pulling down to the material level all that is abstract and high. This materialization of the abstract, the spiritual, is not demeaning; rather, it returns to the earth all forms in order to renew and realign them within the cosmic whole of life:

In grotesque realism, therefore, the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots, of the world; it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earth and the body. We repeat: the body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people’s character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized. The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable. (Bakhtin, 1984b, p.19).

The emphasis on body is fundamental to grotesque realism. The grotesque body is not a finished, unified, chiselled, individuated form as in the classical canon, but an open, protruding mass which constantly “outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” The orifices –“The open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the pot belly, the nose” (Bakhtin, 1984b, p.26) best portray its incompleteness and also its connection with the outside natural world.

The “material bodily principle,” pivotal to grotesque realism, “degrades and materializes” carnival laughter as well by linking it with “the bodily lower stratum” (Bakhtin b, p. 20). However, its vulgar, earthy quality has other components within its “complex nature.” With tremendous economy uncharacteristic of his otherwise expansive style, Bakhtin describes this laughter as:

First of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated “cosmic” event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival. (Bakhtin, 1984b, p.11-12)

In Bakhtin’s view of carnival folk humour, medieval festivities gain significance primarily in relation to the laughter they evoke from the people—“carnival is the people’s second life organized on the basis of laughter” (Bakhtin 1984b, p. 8). For Bakhtin, carnival laughter is liberating. It explodes the monologism of “serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials [by offering] a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations” (Bakhtin 1984 b, p. 6).

According to Bakhtin's revisionary literary history, it is during the Renaissance that the carnival sense of life reaches its peak in literature. In this period the fusion of official and non-official cultures—made possible by the disintegration of feudalism and theocracy—allows “a millennium of folk humor” to enter its literature and fertilize it. Ironically, the Renaissance stress on the individual does not affect this carnivalisation process. As Bakhtin observes: “However divided, atomized, individualized were the ‘private’ bodies, Renaissance realism did not cut off the umbilical cord which tied them to the fruitful womb of the earth. The private and the universal were still blended in a contradictory unity” (Bakhtin 1984 b, p. 23). On the contrary, the Romantic period, Bakhtin declares, with its “private chamber character” explodes this “contradictory unity” creating a hiatus between the private and the universal. Consequently, the positive, regenerative cosmic laughter of the previous ages is “cut down to cold humor, irony, sarcasm” (Bakhtin 1984b, p. 38). Capitalism, and the conditions of class society in modern times, Bakhtin avers, have further broadened the gap. That is, because a new concept of realism seeks to “complete each individual outside the link with the ultimate whole—the whole that has lost the old image and has as yet not found the new one.” The effect is “a broken grotesque figure, the demon of fertility with phallus cut off and belly crushed” (Bakhtin 1984b, p. 53).

In *Rabelais And His World* Bakhtin attempted to popularize Rabelais by examining his works within the traditions of carnivalesque folk culture: “of all great writers of world literature, Rabelais is the least popular, the least understood and appreciated” (Bakhtin 1984 b, p. 1). But the importance of his book, “is its broad development of the ‘carnavalesque’ into a potent, populist, critical inversion of all official words and hierarchies” (Stalleybrass & White, 1986, p.7). Bakhtin perceives in the festive license of the carnival, its collapsing of rigid hierarchies, “a temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order” –a prefiguration of a vision of the world “hostile to all that was immortalized and completed” (Bakhtin 1984 b, p. 10).

What enables carnival to encompass and elide oppositions within its fold, for Bakhtin, is its unique positioning: “It [carnival] belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play” (Bakhtin 1984 b, p.7). This ambivalent positioning—preemptive of any principle of closure—makes carnival in his schema a privileged chronotope (space/time coordinate). By virtue of its ability to sunder “false links [which] are reinforced by scholastic thought, by a false theological and legalistic casuistry and ultimately by language itself, — shot through with centuries and millennia of error” (Bakhtin 1984b, p.169), carnival achieves its chronotopic (see Glossary for explanation) status:

Carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants. (Bakhtin, 1984b, p.7).

Bakhtin's history of literary carnivalisation is made problematic by the nature of its social determinants. As Lacapra incisively observes: "The nature of carnival is obviously bound up with the nature of the rest of social and cultural life, and its function depends, at times in complex ways, upon the variations of that mutual relationship." However, he continues, Bakhtin "does tend to exclude or underemphasize aspects of carnivals or carnival- type phenomena that can appear only pathological from his normative and philosophical perspective" (LaCapra, 1983, p.285-86). Although LaCapra is referring to specific aspects of the Charivari (a French folk custom in which the community would bang on pots and pans and parade to the homes of newly weds. Later, this custom evolved as a form of 'social coercion'.) in early modern Europe, his observation could well extend to Bakhtin's response to other carnival or carnival-type activities in the modern period—the popular protests, counterculture "happenings" and other avant-garde movements of the sixties in America for instance—all of which influence in varying degrees the literature of the period. We will critique Bakhtin's notion of the carnival and carnivalesque from the feminist perspective in the next section.

Check Your Progress:

i) What does Bakhtin see in the festive license of the carnival?

ii) According to Bakhtin's literary history when does the carnival sense of life reach its peak?

5.7 GENDERED READING OF BAKHTIN'S IDEA OF THE CARNIVALESQUE

Bakhtin sees the "universal spirit" of the carnival as liberating in that it embraces "all the people." This seems alluring but is problematic when we consider what constitutes "all the people." For Bakhtin it seems axiomatic that the carnival crowd, bound by the liberating "universal spirit" of carnival, embodies "the people as a whole." He describes the crowd as ...not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organized in their own way, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity. ... (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 255)

This last—the fusion of the individual with the collective—is significant. It implicates a central problem presented by Bakhtin's dialogic approach: viz., the question of a prescriptive category imbricated within the descriptive which carnival, with its potential to collapse oppositions cannot diffuse. Often, this creates instances where Bakhtin makes paradoxical moves. In the passage above, for example, he valorizes polyphony, which he claims is inherent in carnival forms, while at the same time he homogenizes the source of this polyphony, that is, the carnival crowd, and makes it seem a universal, representative whole since the moment people in carnival become individuated subjects, the carnival is over (Carroll, 1983, p. 80).

But what constitutes the “collectivity,” the “people’s mass body,” and what determines “their own way”? Stallybrass and White refer to carnival’s complicitous place in dominant culture: “carnival often violently abuses and demonizes weaker, not stronger, social groups—women, ethnic and religious minorities, those who ‘don’t belong’—in a process of displaced abjection” (Stallybrass and White, 1986, p. 19). Mary Russo, in her illuminating article, “Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory” observes: “Social historians have documented the insight of the anthropologist Victor Turner that the marginal position of women and others in the ‘indicative’ world makes their presence in the ‘subjunctive’ or possible world of the topsy-turvy carnival ‘quintessentially’ dangerous: in fact, as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie shows in *Carnival in Romans*, Jews were stoned, and there is evidence that women were raped, during carnival festivities” (Russo, 1986, p. 217).

Ironically, Bakhtin’s own celebration of carnival and its potential for cosmic polyphony excludes the female voice—a point that Booth raises in his essay “Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism.” Booth says, “Nowhere in Rabelais does one find any hint of an effort to imagine any women’s point of view or to incorporate women into a dialogue. And nowhere in Bakhtin does one discover any suggestion that he sees the importance of this kind of monologue, not even when he discusses Rabelais’ attitude toward women” (Bernstein, 1995, p.166).

Interestingly, Julia Kristeva the French theorist, states that the ambivalence of carnival makes it inherently subversive. But whereas Bakhtin sees this ambivalence as collapsing hierarchies within the social order, Kristeva sees it as undermining the social order itself. For her ambivalence is the product of a convergence of two sign systems and signals to us the presence of intertextuality between the phenotext and the genotext. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* Kristeva describes the phenotext as “a structure (which can be generated, in generative grammar’s sense); it obeys rules of communication and presupposes a subject of enunciation and an addressee”

(Kristeva, 1984, p. 87). On the other hand, she describes the genotext as “a process, which tends to articulate structures that are ephemeral (unstable, threatened by drive charges, ‘quanta’ rather than ‘marks’) and nonsignifying (devices that do not have a double articulation)” (Kristeva, 1984, p. 86).

It is Kristeva’s understanding of ambivalence as the product of a convergence of two sign systems which signals to us the presence of intertextuality that makes her see carnivalism, as Toril Moi says, “as a space where texts meet, contradict and relativize each other” (Moi, 1986, p.34). The twist that Kristeva gives to Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque is slight but important. She connects the carnivalesque to the Semiotic realm. As you have seen previously, Kristeva describes this realm as not linguistic but a pre-oedipal erotic stage in which psychic energy is expressed through bodily rhythms, gestures, nonsense syllables, breathings, laughter etc. (Please refer to MWG 004, Block 4, Unit 2, section 2.3.2). The symbolic realm is related to the law and system of society, the Law-of- the-Father. By connecting the carnivalesque to the semiotic realm she emphasizes the autocritical “Permutational play” in the speaking/writing subject involving structures of desire that bring to light the unconscious of literary production. That is, she reifies the process of silent production in language prior to the appearance of circulatory speech (which is Bakhtin’s focus), and thereby, externalizes the psyche of the speaking/writing subject.

The “flagrant dialogism” of carnival expresses its subversion primarily through parody and laughter. Parody is a refusal or casting off of singular form or categorization that nevertheless retains linguistic definition. Parody is therefore quintessentially doubling and ambivalent. This discourse, which is both representative and non-representative simultaneously, also functions as a provoker of laughter. For Kristeva, laughter has deep ties to the semiotic realm.

By introducing a psycholinguistic dimension to Bakhtin’s socio-historic notion of the carnivalesque, Kristeva enables us to combine the role of the individuated speaking / writing subject in literary production with the collectivity of the people crucial to Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque. That is, Bakhtin and Kristeva’s notions of the carnivalesque conjointly create a productive framework in which to study carnival as both social and literary phenomenon.

Check Your Progress:

i) What is the central problem in Bakhtin’s dialogic approach?

ii) What is the twist that Kristeva gives to Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque?

5.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we familiarized ourselves with Bakhtin’s life and works. We located his work, Rabelais and His World within its literary and political contexts. Besides, this we studied the idea of the Carnavalesque and “its possibility of incorporating into literature the collective, dionysiac impulse of Carnival.” This was followed by a gendered reading of it. The annotated bibliography (Section 2.10) of Bakhtin’s major works along with a glossary of his key terms (Section 2.9) should help you gain a broader understanding of this major author’s contributions to postmodern literary theory. As you read further ahead in this course, you will come across the ideas of other postmodern theorists. Try and compare some of the ideas that you have read here with the readings which follow, especially in terms of their significance to gender studies.

5.9 GLOSSARY OF BAKHTINIAN KEY TERMS

Carnavalesque: See Section 2.6

Chronotope : The word chronotope literally means “time space” and is defined by Bakhtin as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.” In a sense chronotope engages reality because the author in creating his worlds he uses the organising categories of the real world in which he lives.

Dialogism : This is a basic concept in Bakhtin. The idea of entering into dialogue or dialogic relations with anyone involves intertextuality in both time and space. No meaning, word

or existence can be outside of it. It is best to explain the term in Bakhtin's own words: "no living word relates to its object in a singular way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that it is often difficult to penetrate. It is precisely in the process of living interaction with this specific environment that the word may be individualized and given stylistic shape" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 259).

Dialogization can also take place between self and other, written text and performance text etc.

Heteroglossia : is at the heart of all Bakhtinian thought. The term "heteroglossia" in Russian literally refers to "different-speech-ness." It refers to any utterance and interaction between people keeping the immediate context that can add or subtract from the meaning of the utterance. No language is neutral for him. But each such utterance also has a trace of the earlier utterances both in the past and in the future. For Bakhtin this is seen best in the novel form. "Heteroglossia" should not be confused with polyphony (See definition of polyphony). Most importantly "heteroglossia" also refers to the conflict between official and unofficial discourses within the same national language.

Ideology : In Russian the term is "ideologiya" and it does not imply any political ideology but merely the way a community views the world. This is why for him all speakers are "ideologs."

Language : Bakhtin does not see language in the way in which professional linguists see it. He sees it as dynamic and to be understood within the context of the utterance.

Monoglossia : This refers to unified, stable languages that existed in earliest societies.

Polyglossia : For Bakhtin this refers to the simultaneous existence of one or more national languages in the same society as in Ancient Rome and during the period of the Renaissance.

Polyphony : This is different from "heteroglossia" in that the latter refers to the conflict between antagonistic social forces. Polyphony on the other hand refers to interacting on equal terms as the characters in Dostoevsky's novels where the hero and the author's discourses interact on equal terms. In his discussion of polyphony and the potential for it in literary forms, Bakhtin dismisses drama as being monologic. Obviously, he has classical drama in mind when he speaks of it as unilinear and closed as a form. He says, "drama is by its very nature alien to genuine polyphony; drama may be multi-leveled, but

it cannot contain multiple worlds; it permits only one, and not several systems of measurement" (Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, 1984).

Speech genres : Genre, for Bakhtin, is a very fluid term. This is used to describe a set of linguistic conventions agreed upon by the speakers in a written or spoken context. He talks of two kinds of speech genre the primary and the everyday genres. The first refers to talking about the weather etc. The second is more complex in that it includes artistic and political discourses as well. For Bakhtin form in art is related intrinsically to communication. In a sense it becomes integral to the value the content is expressing.

5.10 BAKHTIN'S ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF MAJOR WORKS

Rabelais And His World (1975): See Section 2.5: Rabelais And His World
Toward a Philosophy of the Act: This was written between 1919 and 1921, and published as late as 1986. Since the manuscript was badly damaged with pages missing it has been published as an incomplete document. Bakhtin mentions in it that he intended the book to have four parts. In the first he stated he wanted to talk of communicative acts in the real world, followed by aesthetics and art in relation to the creative spirit. The two other parts were supposed to talk about ethics in relation to politics and religion. This work is important because in it Bakhtin outlines his idea of the identity of the individual as emerging within an open, communicative context.

Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics: The book was published in 1929 as Problems of Dostoevsky's Art. Later, Bakhtin added a chapter on the carnival to it and published it as Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics. The book is not just about the novelist Dostoevsky but it provides very original theories of the novel. There was, for Bakhtin, an equality that existed between the author and the characters in the novel. Bakhtin's idea that individuals cannot be seen as complete is explored here. For him the individual self unfolds within an interactive context. In this sense, it is a collective process. Dostoevsky's characters could do this, which accounted for true polyphony in his novels. It is lack of closure that allows polyphony to flourish. Truth emerges through polyphony. It can never be contained within one voice or one person. Bakhtin uses the idea of the carnival to illustrate his theory.

The Dialogic Imagination: Some of the seminal ideas in Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics (1929) are more fully developed in his book, The Dialogic Imagination that was published in 1975. In this book, he privileges the novel form over the epic, stating that in postindustrial society the former is more conducive to polyphony, which the epic tries to erase. Bakhtin does not see the novel as a new genre but as a coming together of past texts.

Speech Genres and Other Late Essays: There are six essays in this book. In it Bakhtin shifts his focus from art and aesthetics in his earlier works to problems of method and culture. For him genres are not merely confined to language but to broader communicative acts. He makes a distinction between everyday language and language as used in literature. He states that when we speak of

genres we only talk of it in relation to literature but they are connected to genres outside of these as well. He talks of primary and secondary genres. The former is associated with everyday experiences and the latter is linked to legal and scientific texts.

It is important to note that Bakhtin's key concepts like Heteroglossia, Monoglossia, Dialogism, Carnavalesque and Chronotope are used in understanding the ethical and political dimensions of language.

5.11 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Why does Bakhtin privilege the novel form? Discuss.
 - 2) What does Bakhtin mean by stating that language is not static but dynamic? Explain in your own words.
 - 3)
 - a) Explain Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque and its significance.
 - b) How does Bakhtin's approach to the carnival exclude the female voice?
 - 4) Describe through short notes the following terms: Dialogism, Polyglossia, Heteroglossia, Monoglossia, Polyphony.
-

5.12 REFERENCES

Adlam, C. (1997). *Ethics of Difference: Bakhtin's Early Writings and Feminist Theories*. In C. Adlam, R. Falconer, V. Makhlin & A. Renfrew (Eds.), *Face to Face: Bakhtin in Russia and the West*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Bakhtin, Mikhail M. (1981). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Ed.) Michael Holquist. (Trans.) Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist Austin. London: University of Texas Press.

Bakhtin, Mikhail M. (1984a). *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. (Ed. and Trans.) Caryl. Emerson Minneapolis: MUP.

Bakhtin, Mikhail M. (1984b). *Rabelais and His World*. (Trans.) Helene Iswolsky USA: Indian University Press.

Bakhtin, Mikhail M. (1986). *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. (Trans.) Vern W. McGee. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press.

Bakhtin, Mikhail M. (1990). *Art and Responsibility in Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*. Texas: University of Texas Press.

Bakhtin, Mikhail M. (1993). *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. (Eds.) Vadim Liapunov & Michael Holquist. Trans. by Vadim Liapunov. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Bauer, D.M. (1988). *Feminist Dialogics: A Theory of Failed Community*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Bauer, D.M. & McKinstry. S.J. (1991). (Eds). *Feminism, Bakhtin and the Dialogic*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Bernstein, M.A. (1995). *When the Carnival Turns Bitter: Preliminary Reflections upon the Abject Hero*. *Critical Inquiry*. 1983, 10(2), 183-306, reprinted in Morson G.S. (Ed.) *Bakhtin: Essays and Dialogues on His Work*. Chicago. ILL: University of Chicago Press,

Booth, W.C. (1982). *Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism*. *Critical Inquiry*. 9(1). 45-76.

- Carroll, D. (1983). The Alterity of Discourse: Form, History and the Question of the Political in M.M. Bakhtin. *Diacritics*. 13(2), 65-83.
- Clark, K. & Holquist, M. (1984). *Mikhail Bakhtin*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Dentith, S. (1995). *Bakhtinian Thought*. New Jersey: Routledge.
- Diocaretz, D. & Bakhtin, M. (1989). Discourse and Feminist Theories. In M. Diaz-Diocaretz (Eds.), *The Bakhtin Circle Today: Critical Studies* 1(2), 212-39.
- Eagleton, T. (1981). *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*. London: Verso editions and NLB.
- Eagleton, T. (1989). Bakhtin, Schopenhauer, Kundera, in *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*. (Eds.), Ken Hirschkop & David G. Shepherd. Manchester: MUP.
- Glazener, N. (1989). Dialogic Subversion: Bakhtin, the Novel and Gertrude Stein. In Hirschkop and Shepherd, (Eds.), *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*. pp. 109-129. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Hall, J. (1985). Falstaff, Sancho Panza and Azdak: Carnival and History, *Comparative Criticism*, (7), 127-46.
- Holme, Karen & Helen Wussow (1994). (Eds). *A Dialogue of Voices: Feminist Literary Theory and Bakhtin*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota.
- Kristeva, J. (1984). *Revolution in Poetic language*, (Trans.) Margaret Waller, NY: CUP.
- LaCapra, Dominick (1983). *Rethinking Intellectual History*. Ithaca: CUP.
- Lunacharsky, Anatoly. *Anatoly Lunacharsky archive*.
- Moi, T. (1986). (Eds). *The Kristevan Reader*. NY: Cup.
- Russo, M. (1986). *Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory*. In T. de Laurentis (Ed.), *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Stalleybrass, P. & White, A. (1986). *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. London: Methuen.
- Stam, R. (1988). *Mikhail Bakhtin and Left Cultural Critique*. In E. A. Kaplan (Ed.) *Postmodernism and Its Discontents*. London: Verso.

5.13 SUGGESTED READINGS

- Brandist, C. (2002). *The Bakhtin Circle: Philosophy, Culture and Politics*. London, Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press.
- Hirschkop, K. (1986). Bakhtin, Discourse and Democracy. *New Left Review* 1/160, November-December.
- Vice, S. (1997). *Introducing Bakhtin*: Manchester University Press.

UNIT 6 Jacques Derrida

Structure

- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 Objectives
- 6.3 Jacques Derrida: Life & Works
- 6.4 Structure, Sign and Play: An Introduction to Early Derridean Thought
 - 6.4.1 Structure, Centre, Margin
 - 6.4.2 Derrida's Critique of Levi Strauss and Ethnology
- 6.5 Deconstruction
- 6.6 Derrida and the Question of Gender
 - 6.6.1 The Problematics of Gender
 - 6.6.2 Elizabeth Grosz: Overview of Feminism & Deconstruction
- 6.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.8 Glossary
- 6.9 Unit End Questions
- 6.10 References
- 6.11 Suggested Readings

6.1 INTRODUCTION

You have already been briefly introduced to the work of Jacques Derrida in the unit on “Feminism and Deconstruction” in a previous course (see MWG 103, Block 1, Unit 4). Before you begin reading this unit, you may find it helpful to review what you have read earlier. In this unit, we will examine Derrida’s work much more closely with a view to better appreciate its implications for questions of gender identity and politics. To this end, we will first attempt to clarify some of the basic premises that inform Derrida’s works through a close scrutiny of his ground-breaking essay, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.” Continuing your earlier engagement with the term, we will then seek to understand the different ways in which Derrida theorised, deployed and practised deconstruction. Finally, we will explore Derrida’s statements about the woman question and conclude with a synoptic account of various feminist responses to Derridean thinking.

6.2 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- Appreciate the significance of Jacques Derrida’s work within the context of contemporary Western thought;
- Explain some of the concepts and assumptions that consistently shape Derrida’s works;

- Provide an informed discussion of the important debates around deconstruction as well as Derrida's understanding and use of the term;
- Clarify Derrida's position on the question of woman or gendered identity and feminism; and
- Assess the value of Derrida's work from a feminist perspective.

6.3 JACQUES DERRIDA: LIFE AND WORKS

Jacques Derrida was born in 1930 to a petit bourgeois Sephardic Jewish couple in the El Biar suburb of French-ruled Algiers. He had four other siblings, two elder and two younger, none of whom pursued academics. After an early education in Algiers intermittently marred by incidents of anti-Semitism—being expelled from one school and pressured to leave another because he was a Jew—Derrida left for France in 1949 to complete his higher studies. To begin with, he was at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris. Thereafter, in 1952, despite trying and failing initially, he secured acceptance at the reputed École Normale Supérieure where many illustrious French intellectuals cut their academic teeth. At ENS, Derrida not only met Louis Althusser with whom he struck up a close friendship over the years but also others like Jean Hippolyte and Michel Foucault. While Derrida's early philosophical training and work in France was largely focussed on Edmund Husserl and related phenomenological concerns, he was also influenced by and engaged with the works of Rousseau, Sartre, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Saussure, Freud, Levinas, Strauss, among others. He submitted his dissertation on Husserl for his Diplôme d'études supérieures, the equivalent of a Master's degree, in 1954.

Derrida did not defend his doctoral thesis until 1980, but before that and subsequent to teaching soldiers' children in exchange for active military service during the Algerian War of Independence, he held several academic positions at prestigious institutions, initially in France and later abroad, especially, the United States. In Paris, after teaching at the Sorbonne (1960–64), Derrida was invited to join the École Normale Supérieure by Althusser and Hippolyte in 1964. He remained with ENS till 1983. Subsequently, till his death, he served as the Director of Studies at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. In 1983, he was also instrumental in the setting up of the Collège Internationale de Philosophie—an institute meant to radicalize the research and dissemination of philosophy and free it from rigid establishment controls. Derrida served as inaugural President of the Collège Internationale de Philosophie. Concurrently, from the seventies on, Derrida worked at several American institutions including Yale University, Johns Hopkins, SUNY Buffalo, Cornell University, and University of California, Irvine. Starting in 1986, in fact, he had an ongoing arrangement to teach for one semester every year at the latter institution, which now also houses the valuable Derrida archives. Apart from these regular and visiting appointments, Derrida also lectured and toured extensively around the world, with India too making it on his itinerary.

Derrida succumbed to pancreatic cancer in 2004, a little while after he was first diagnosed with the disease. He was survived by his wife, Marguerite Aucouturier, a psychoanalyst (whom he married in 1957 when at Harvard on a grant to study James Joyce), their two sons, Pierre and Jean, and two grandchildren. Derrida also had another son, Daniel, with feminist philosopher Sylvia Agacinski.

While his star has been on the wane for some years now, at the peak of his career Derrida attracted celebrity and controversy, flack and following to a degree unparalleled by any of his contemporaries. Derrida began the early years of the sixties quietly enough, writing reviews and actively contributing to *Tel Quel*, the French left-avant-garde journal begun by Philippe Sollers and Jean-Edern Hallier in 1960. He first came to the notice of the English speaking world at a 1966 conference hosted by the Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, called "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man." Derrida presented his now famous paper "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" to this forum, which even today is often cited as the moment when Poststructuralism announced its arrival on the world intellectual scene. The following year saw Derrida further firm up his international credentials with three significant publications: *Speech and Phenomena* (trans. 1973), *Writing and Difference* (trans. 1978), and his most famous *Of Grammatology* (trans. 1976). Together, these works provided an early demonstration of that most controversial of terms associated with Derrida, i.e., deconstruction. Derrida did not slow down after his 'annus mirabilis' (year of wonders, or more appropriately, here, year of wonderful achievements). Rather, he proved a prolific author till the end who had over 50 books and literally countless essays and papers to his credit. Some of Derrida's important later works include *Glas*, *Acts of Literature*, *Aporias*, *Specters of Marx*, *The Gift of Death*, and *Of Hospitality*.

It is often said that a break is discernible from the 1990s in the body of his work, marking a much more political and ethical "turn" in his preoccupations. Writings such as *Specters of Marx*, *Politics of Friendship*,

On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness, among others are adduced in support of the claim. Indeed, one of the most persistent criticisms levelled against Derrida has precisely to do with his work being seen as "apolitical" and nihilistic. His dilatory and deliberately opaque prose, the extreme experiments with style, for instance, in *Glas* and *Postcard from Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, the unrelenting focus on text and textuality in the earlier works, the association with Paul de Man and the so-called Yale school of criticism, combined with often misapprehended apothegms (sayings or maxims) like "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" (see glossary) that have taken on a life of their own have only fed fire to this perception.

Identitarian (those who privilege different identity groups like class or gender or race as categories around which to mobilise opinion and/or agitate) thinkers, including old-school Marxists and feminists, have been wary of Derridean deconstructive premises, suspecting it of playing into conservative hands and fronting reactionary agendas. While Derrida has consistently refused simplistic political stances and gestures, he has always asserted a continuity in the philosophical tenor of his works. And during his lifetime he has many times given both verbal and active support to political causes, whether that be protesting against the Vietnam War or capital punishment, or apartheid in South Africa or mobilising for the rights of state-persecuted Czech writers and immigrant employees in France.

Another set of people, especially, analytic philosophers have been wary of Derrida on different grounds: they questioned if he was a philosopher at all and alleged he had greater traction with literary and cultural studies departments than with scholars of his own stripe. Things came to a head in 1992 when

Cambridge University's decision to confer an Honorary Doctorate on Derrida sparked off an unprecedented transcontinental letter campaign by some faculty members to foil the move. They were defeated when matters were put to a vote and Derrida finally got the honorary doctorate from Cambridge University as indeed he did from many other institutions. But the episode captures in gist the kind of resentment and resistance Derrida generated in certain quarters.

Derrida was notoriously camera-shy in the early part of his career: he did not want his photograph/face to "authorize" his writing. Later, however, he eased up to the extent of starring in a film called Derrida! Despite the fact that Derrida is no longer "the rage" as he once was across American literary and humanities departments, he is by no means without influence. He continues to inspire conferences, special issues of journals, books and research aplenty at least in the Anglophone academy, including India, close to seven years after his death and forty-five years after he first emerged upon the international academic stage. This is certainly testament to his enduring value as a thinker. It also means that there are numerous sources and avenues through which to process that value for ourselves.

6.4 STRUCTURE, SIGN AND PLAY: AN INTRODUCTION TO EARLY DERRIDEAN THOUGHT

This section offers an introduction to early Derridean thought through an exposition of the core ideas articulated in Derrida's ground breaking essay, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." Since the premises of the essay remain germane to much of Derrida's oeuvre or body of work, "Structure, Sign and Play..." in many ways selects itself as an introductory text par excellence. As already mentioned, Derrida first presented his ideas in the form of a paper at a 1966 conference called "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man," organised by René Girard, Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato at the Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore. This conference was originally meant to acknowledge the influence of Levi Strauss' structural anthropology across the social sciences and humanities and hail the arrival and establishment of structuralism as an inter-disciplinary programme for the first time in the US. Not surprisingly, several leading structuralists of the time (Roland Barthes, Tzvetan Todorov, Lacan, Lucien Goldmann, to name a few) were to be counted among the attendees. That the conference volume when it was published in 1970, far from celebrating structuralism was subtitled *The Structuralist Controversy* is a measure of the kind of impact that Derrida's paper had. In retrospect, the 1966 paper is often identified as a significant moment in the advent and elaboration of poststructuralism.

6.4.1 Structure, Centre, Margin

The recurring proposition of "Structure, Sign and Play..." is simply that an "event" has occurred in "the history of the concept of structure" which simultaneously bears the characteristics of a "rupture" and a "redoubling" (Derrida, 2004, p. 89). The rest of the essay, as will become clearer as you read on, fleshes out the form and implications of this "event" in a way that constitutes a thoroughgoing critique of longstanding Western philosophical assumptions.

According to Derrida (2004), traditionally, Western philosophy has avoided engaging with the constructedness of structures; that is to say, their being constructed and not natural structures. This avoidance is managed through recourse to the notion of a centre: “the structurality of structure...has always been neutralized or reduced...by a process of giving it a centre, or of referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin” (Derrida, 2004, p. 90). To paraphrase Derrida, the centre is whatever performs as the organizing principle of a structure. In so doing, it not only stabilizes and naturalizes the structure it is centre of, but also, necessarily, itself. In other words, the centre functions to control what Derrida calls “the play of the structure” (see glossary for “play”). On the one hand, “by orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the centre of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form” (Derrida, 2004, p. 90). On the other hand, the centre also cuts off play beyond the margins of the structure it demarcates. Moreover, as centre, it is the point at which the limited play which characterizes a structure and constitutes its structural logic becomes impossible, or as Derrida qualifies “has always remained interdicted” (Derrida, 2004, p. 90).

One way to understand the concept of centre and structure is by thinking of a game, say, cricket. Fielders can be positioned in different places on the field by the captains or the bowlers; bowlers can be changed; the batting order can be moved around; the batsmen have flexibility in choice of strokes, while the bowlers in choice of delivery—bouncer, yorker, googly, etc. However, this play and flexibility disappears when it comes to the core set of rules which govern the different formats of the game. For e.g., a batsman cannot play with a baseball bat, a bowler cannot throw the ball, and so on. If the core rules changed then the very structure of the game as we know it would become impossible. Yet these core rules are not really unchangeable or natural. The different formats of cricket show that rules can and have been changed to produce new forms of cricket. The rules are thus arbitrarily made up. They are not the game, but some sort of consensus about a set of rules makes the game possible. Hence the paradox of classical thought: the centre is both inside and outside the structure. “The centre is at the centre of the totality, and yet, since the centre does not belong to the totality..., the totality has its centre elsewhere. The center is not the center” (Derrida, 2004, p. 90). Centred structures, thus, are, by definition, instances of contrived coherence or coherence in contradiction; they are premised on an absent presence—the centre. They are inherently unstable, although they project an appearance of stability and fixity through the ruse of the idea of a natural centre.

The “event” that Derrida calls attention to at the start of the essay is firstly a greater awareness of the constructedness of structures or thought systems, their “structurality” which has always existed since structures must inevitably be constructed. This leads to a more acute consciousness of play (defined as rupture or the disruption of presence), rather than centred presence, as the matrix and modality of meaning (hence rupture). The history of Western philosophy prior to this “event,” Derrida contends is “a series of substitutions of centre for center” whose task has been “the determination of Being as presence” where presence includes “all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the centre” be it “eidos, arche, telos, energeia, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject), aletheia, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth” (Derrida, 2004, p. 90-91). In other words, transcendental signifieds invested

with authority by the structures of which they are a part are centred within the structure and consequently lead to the creation of power hierarchies with a dominant centre and its margins.

Where lies the source of the change in thinking, of the decentering of dominant philosophical assumptions about structures and centres? Since 'origins' refer to a central or initial point, Derrida is loath to fix a point of origin to this alternative stream of thought and so re-enact a lapse into centred thinking. Nonetheless, he cites Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger as some examples who undertook in various ways to destabilize different axiomatic anchors of Western philosophy, i.e., Truth, a fully conscious and rational Self, Being.

Derrida insists furthermore that, in the "absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse," i.e., "a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences" (2004, p. 91). In other words, once the idea of centred stable structures came to be discredited, language (especially Saussure's understanding of language as made up of signs whose relations to each other is arbitrary and conventional) became the model for understanding how meaning was generated through difference and in relation. (We have looked at Saussure's contributions already in Block 1, Unit 1, Section 1.3.1. You may also like to refer back to MWG 103, Block 1, Unit 4, Section 4.3.1.2/3 for a basic understanding of these ideas.)

Underscoring the onset of the era of discourse and textuality, however, is not simply an unacknowledged nod to Saussurean linguistics and the structuralist wave it generated: Derrida is quick to point out how taking the sign to be a stable concept merely makes of it a new nucleus of centred

thinking. In fact, this insistence on difference from Saussurean structuralism becomes the launch pad for Derrida's engagement with the Saussure-influenced structural anthropology of Levi Strauss.

The critique which follows is not any wholesale rejection of Levi Strauss as has been sometimes alleged. Rather, it is a deconstructive reading attentive to the unresolved tensions and paradoxes underlying the Straussian project to come up with a science of human cognition, to determine the deep structures of thought which generate the vast variety of past and present cultural formations and expressions. The tone is set early with Derrida's nuanced representation of the salience of ethnology and Levi Strauss at the time.

6.4.2 Derrida's Critique of Levi Strauss and Ethnology

Comparative ethnology studies human groups or cultures in a comparative frame without a priori privileging any one culture over the other. European ethnocentrism refers to the practice among scholars to take Europe and the white European as the point of reference and standard against which to measure all other civilizations, races and ethnicities. According to Derrida, comparative ethnology is born precisely at the moment when European ethnocentrism bites the dust. Nonetheless, ethnology remains a European science. Levi Strauss, Derrida says, deserves attention not simply because of the prestige attached to ethnology in the contemporary moment or because his ethnology has been influential. Rather, Strauss deserves attention because a "certain choice" and "doctrine has been elaborated" (p. 93) in his work as concerns the discourse and purport of ethnology vis-à-vis the social sciences. In other words, Levi Strauss

is important for the ways in which he is both inside and outside the practices of traditional European social sciences: on the one hand, using such concepts and methods as he finds practical, and on the other, showing them up to be contingent and convenient ideas and tools.

In example after example thereafter, Derrida demonstrates both what Levi Strauss' ethnology achieves but also and more importantly, what it shies away from and/or excludes. Take, for instance, the nature/culture binary that has structured Western epistemology since even before the time of Plato. In *Elementary Structures*, Levi Strauss calls the incest prohibition a scandal, something which cannot be explained by the nature/culture opposition (see glossary) in that it has the predicates or characteristics of both categories. Derrida asserts that "[b]y commencing his work with the factum of the incest prohibition" Levi Strauss "places himself at the point at which this difference [between nature and culture], which has always been assumed to be self-evident, finds itself erased or questioned" (Derrida, 2004, p. 94). According to Derrida, Strauss on the one hand, exposes the dichotomous understanding of nature and culture to be problematic because of the widespread prevalence of the incest prohibition. On the other hand, Derrida says, Strauss by calling the incest prohibition a scandal paradoxically gives legitimacy to the nature/culture binary, for only when the nature/ culture binary is taken to be a norm, can the incest prohibition be seen as a scandal.

Derrida explains that the bricoleur, as opposed to the engineer, according to Strauss in *The Savage Mind* is someone who uses the means at hand to perform his task/s (2004, p. 95). In other words, where the bricoleur innovates, the engineer invents could be one way of understanding the distinction. While Derrida acknowledges the legitimacy of bricolage (play; see Glossary), that is, the discourse of the bricoleur, he also shows how the binary within which the bricoleur exists is unsustainable on deeper scrutiny. "If bricolage" Derrida points out is "the necessity of borrowing one's concepts from the text of a heritage" (i.e., a pre-existent system or structure of thought) then "every discourse is bricoleur" and the engineer who must "construct the totality of his language, syntax, and lexicon" inevitably "a myth produced by the bricoleur" for self-confirmation (Derrida. 2004, p. 96).

While the concept of play as bricolage, as supplementarity, has been significant in Strauss' work, Derrida faults the ethnologist, ultimately, for the unexamined tensions between play and history, and play and presence that inform Strauss' writings. Derrida perceives "in his work a sort of ethic of presence, an ethic of nostalgia for origins [i.e., centres]..." (Derrida, 2004, p. 102). This structuralist position, according to Derrida, celebrates the fictiveness of the centre as freedom.

"Structure, Sign and Play" thus offers a comprehensive critique of Western philosophy. Through a deconstructive reading of the binary oppositions that undergird its metaphysics of presence, its centred structures, Derrida highlights the play of signs which is limited, excluded and falsely rendered derivative. His engagement of Strauss likewise reveals the blindspots of structuralism. The poststructuralism he heralds in many ways is only the extension, rather than the overturning of structuralist insights. It is a carrying forward of structuralist thought through to its logical conclusion, which, of course, in unraveling and superceding structuralist verities participates in "the seminal adventure of

the trace” (Derrida, 2004, p. 102; see glossary for “trace”) and announces the arrival of the poststructuralist moment of play “without security” (Derrida, 2004, p. 102). In retrospect, it should be clear how the title of Derrida’s essay represents a rather exact if condensed articulation of the major shifts in Western epistemology round the human sciences up to the conjuncture of the 1966 conference: from structure to sign, and almost simultaneously, to play.

6.5 DECONSTRUCTION

You have already been introduced to Derrida and deconstruction in MWG 103 (Block 1, Unit 4), where we looked at some intersections between feminism and deconstruction. In the popular imaginary, Derrida and deconstruction go together, with deconstruction often serving as shorthand and stand-in for Derrida’s entire body of work. Such has been the purchase of this identification that no introduction to Derrida can avoid engaging with the term without calling into question the credibility of its own enterprise. Because deconstruction is an important and multiply meaningful word in the Derridean lexicon, this section offers a brief clarification of the term and its checkered life in the Western academia.

The word deconstruction first appears in Derrida’s writings in the 1960s. Contrary to common belief, it is no invention on the part of Derrida. As Derrida himself states, deconstruction is “a very old word in the French language” (as cited in Wolfreys, 2008, p. 21). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word is also no newcomer to the English language, having first found written expression in English way back in 1882. Derrida’s use of deconstruction, moreover, draws substantially on the German philosopher Martin Heidegger’s employment of the German concepts *Destruktion* and *abbau*.

This idea of deconstruction was never far from Derrida’s early writings and his entire oeuvre may justly be seen as performing it, with two important caveats. As Peggy Kamuf notes, “Derrida had initially proposed [deconstruction] in a chain with other words—for example, *différance*, spacing, trace—none of which can command the series or function as a master-word” (as cited in Wolfreys, 2008, p. 23). That is to say, first of all, deconstruction has no priority in Derrida’s body of writings as the core signifier of a practice, a programme, a thesis or anything else. Second, Derrida has been neither unequivocal in his enthusiasm for the term nor consistent when elaborating on it. At least some of Derrida’s reluctance to have his work reduced to this one word may be attributed to deconstruction’s “American chapter.”

For a time when Derrida was at Yale University in the late 70s and early 80s, he was part of a group of prominent literary critics, among them, Paul de Man, J Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman, and Harold Bloom, who were tagged as constituting the Yale School of deconstruction. There was, in fact, no such “school,” it being chiefly a media creation, based, as Julian Wolfreys says, on a fundamental “misunderstanding of the nature of the critical work that Derrida, de Man and Miller were each, in their own fashion, pursuing. Such work was mistakenly given the name of ‘deconstruction...’” (Wolfreys, 2008, p. 7). The label stuck, no doubt helped in part by the 1979 anthology *Deconstruction and Criticism* to which Derrida et al contributed.

The chief drawbacks of the American literature departments’ embrace of Derrida and deconstruction were two-fold. On the one hand, the philosophical context of

Derrida's writings—which back in France included the twin ruling ideologies of phenomenology and structuralism with which Derrida was grappling—got elided in the American valorization of deconstruction as Derrida, and the further representation of that deconstruction as principally a method of reading literary texts. So transformed into an instrument and pedagogy, deconstruction proved fertile ground for a welter of distortions which while outraging and intimidating people with its “extremism,” its “irreverence,” its “nihilism,” its “textualism” (Richard Rorty, Robert Scholes among others) its “obscurantism” (Foucault is alleged to have commented on Derrida's intellectual terrorism), also won for Derrida messianic cult status for a period of time. The currency of misreadings round Derrida's *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*, for instance, certainly can be attributed to this warped dynamic of translation and reception at play in America.

On the other hand, because of its close association with the Yale literary critics, deconstruction could not escape being embroiled in the whole Paul de Man saga. When, after his death, a couple of previously unknown articles by de Man expressing anti-Semitic thoughts during the World War were discovered, the backlash was swift and brutal. Paul de Man was pilloried as a Nazi apologist. Along with de Man, deconstruction too was reviled for its political evasiveness, its relativism, even fascism. In fact, neither deconstruction nor Derrida has been able to completely shake off the infamy and slur (intellectual and ethical) that attached to involvement in the de Man affair. Not surprisingly, Derrida himself has expressed reservations about the American avatar of deconstruction.

So, what is deconstruction? Over the years, Derrida's responses to this question have been erratic—ranging from a refusal to oblige calls for definition to a disavowal of the term. Some of these include the following assertions: “I have never claimed to identify myself with what may be designated by this name [deconstruction]. It has always seemed strange to me, it has always left me cold. Moreover, I have never stopped having doubts about the very identity of what is referred to by such a nickname” (Derrida, 1995, p. 15); “...in spite of appearances, deconstruction is neither an analysis nor a critique.... I would say the same about method. Deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one.... It must also be made clear that deconstruction is not even an act or even an operation” (Derrida, 1988a, p. 3). His clarifications ranged from sometimes cryptic to sometimes loquacious statements on deconstruction. On one occasion, Derrida claims that “deconstruction not only teaches us to read literature more thoroughly by attending to it as language... it also enables us to interrogate the covert philosophical and political presuppositions of institutionalized critical methods which generally govern our reading of a text...” (Derrida, 1984, p. 125). In another instance he speaks of deconstruction as “destabilization on the move”: “but it is not negative. Destabilization is required for ‘progress’ as well. And the ‘de-’ of deconstruction signifies not the demolition of what is constructing itself, but rather what remains to be thought beyond the constructivist or destructionist scheme...” (Derrida, 1988b, p. 147). Elsewhere he asserts that “Deconstruction is justice” (Derrida, 1992, p. 15) while distinguishing both from law. In still other statements, Derrida claims that “Deconstruction is merciless,” (Derrida, 1995, p. 16) a “kind of ethics of ingratitude” (Derrida, 1995, p. 15) at one and the same time as it is “devoted to grace and gratitude, thus to a gratitude without thanks, without exchange...”

(Derrida, 1995, p. 15). Moreover, that “deconstruction would consist, if at least it did consist, in...deconstructing, dislocating, displacing, disarticulating, disjoining, putting ‘out of joint’ the authority of the ‘is’” (Derrida, 1995, p. 25).

As you can see from the above, deconstruction is not a static theory or stable set of formulas for Derrida available before-the-fact for ready application, or for replication/reproduction. In fact, as Martin McQuillan declares “Deconstruction is not a school or an ‘ism’. There is no such thing as ‘deconstructionism’ [incidentally, Edward Said is one of the people known to have used the word!]: this is a word used by idiots” (McQuillan, 2000, p. 41). Nonetheless, certain recurrent patterns and strategies may be isolated as more pertinent to the work of deconstruction through close attention to Derrida’s writings, especially as it concerns reading texts. If, according to Derrida, deconstruction destabilizes the structures of logo- and phonocentric (see glossary for both terms) thinking and by extension the metaphysics of presence from within, then *sous rature* (see glossary) or the practice of placing terms under erasure, is significant. It works on the principle that received notions, that language itself, in the case of Derrida, is “inadequate yet necessary” (Sarup, 1993, p. 33).

Ultimately, however, Nicholas Royle’s (2007) collage of terms working on the logic of “and” and “also” may be the best way, strategically as well as empirically, to tackle the question, what is deconstruction. In other words, deconstruction cannot be pinned down to any one or even a set of meanings. It remains an open-ended term.

Check Your Progress:

i) Did Derrida invent the term “deconstruction”?

ii) What were the chief drawbacks of the American literature departments’ embrace of Derrida? Did Derrida distance himself from this? Explain.

iii) Has Derrida been consistent in his definition of the term? What are some of the ways in which he has talked about the term?

6.6 DERRIDA AND THE QUESTION OF GENDER

How might the positions and formulations sketched above impact or intersect with questions of gender, subjectivity and agency? Has Derrida ever directly addressed the problematic of gender identity/politics in his texts? How have feminists responded to the provocations of Derrida’s work? Do they see potential in deconstruction to forge a useful feminist praxis, or do they see Derrida and his writings to be fundamentally hostile to any practical feminist politics? In this section, let us briefly illuminate some of the conflicts and concerns around gender based on our understanding of Derrida’s writings.

6.6.1 The Problematics of Gender

Derrida has not dealt directly with the topic of women, sexual difference, femininity and/or gender politics in his work except sporadically—Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles; "Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference"; Glas; "Otobiographies"; "Women in the Beehive"; The Post Card; "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am"; "Choreographies"; "Deconstruction in America" being some examples of this engagement. Scant and scattered as it may be, Derrida's thoughts have occasioned much debate and interest among feminists. Especially controversial has been Derrida's articulation of woman as concept as well as his deprecation of feminism.

In *Spurs* (1979), for instance, Derrida offers a representation of woman as concept that has exercised and influenced feminist thinking over the years (for instance, the works of Teresa de Lauretis, Jane Gallop, Gayatri Spivak, Jacqueline Rose, to name a few). According to Derrida, Nietzsche's dispersed statements about the essential metaphoricity of woman, the "relation between art and woman" (Derrida, 1979, p. 47) constitute a rethinking of truth, indeed, of philosophy itself. Nietzsche's woman "is not a determinable thing.... Perhaps, woman—a non-identity, a non-figure, a simulacrum—is distance's very chasm" (Derrida, 1979, p. 49). Furthermore, "There is no such thing as the essence of woman because woman averts, she is averted of herself. There is no such thing as the truth of woman, ... Woman is but one name for that untruth of truth" (1979, p. 51). "That which will not be pinned down by truth is, in truth—feminine (1979, p. 55). If this is so, however, the "credulous and dogmatic philosopher who believes in the truth that is woman, who believes in truth just as he believes in woman, this philosopher has understood nothing. He has understood nothing of truth, nor anything of woman. Because, indeed, if woman is truth, she at least knows that there is no truth, that truth has no place here and that no one has a place for truth. And she is woman precisely because she herself does not believe in truth itself, because she does not believe in what she is, what she is believed to be, in what she thus is not" (Derrida, 1979, p. 53).

While deconstruction has been equated with "woman," among many other terms, Derrida is keen to clarify that "For me deconstruction is certainly not feminist." Deconstruction "naturally supposes a radical deconstruction of phallogocentrism [see glossary], and certainly an absolutely other and new interest in women's questions. But if there is one thing it must not come to, it's feminism." Rather, "deconstruction is deconstruction of feminism, from the start, insofar as feminism is a form—no doubt necessary at a certain moment—but a form of phallogocentrism among others" (Derrida, 1985, pp. 30-31).

As mentioned, Derrida's formulations on "woman" and deconstruction itself have been furiously contested as well as welcomed by feminist thinkers. If Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak (postcolonial feminism), Drucilla Cornell (ethical feminism), Joan W Scott (politics of gender in history), Hélène Cixous (*écriture féminine*) are some of the names that might be adduced in favour of Derridean insights, then Seyla Benhabib, Margaret Whitford, Somer Brodrib, Rosi Braidotti, among others, may be cited as feminists more critical of Derrida. Cornell (1995), for instance, is emphatic that Derrida's "exposure of the limit of phallogocentrism—the way in which central philosophical concepts are profoundly tied in with the unconscious significance given to the phallus—is an important intervention for making that process of resymbolization possible"

(Cornell, 1995, p. 151) which it is the task of contemporary feminism to work towards.

It is not possible to rehearse here in any detail the sheer variety of feminist responses to Derrida. Instead, this section concludes with a summing up of some of the salient points of overlap and divergence between feminism and Derridean thinking provided by Elizabeth Grosz.

6.6.2 Elizabeth Grosz: Overview of Feminism and Deconstruction

According to Grosz (1989), the value of Derrida to feminism may be encapsulated under four heads:

- his critique of logocentrism;
- the stress on “materiality of reading processes;
- the concept of *différance*; and
- his “focus on the irreducible textuality of discourses” (Grosz, 1989, p. 37).

Let us look at each one of these, as discussed by Grosz. Of the first, Grosz asserts that Derrida’s “challenge to logocentricism parallels and refines feminist challenges to phallogocentric discourse. Logocentrism is implicitly patriarchal. Given the close cooperation between these ‘centrisms,’ deconstruction and the play of difference it engenders, are allied with feminist struggles within the production of discourses” (Grosz, 1989, p. 37).

Likewise, Derrida’s insistence “on the materiality of reading processes confirms the productivity attributed to it by Althusser and Lacan. ... Derrida makes the powers at work in discourses (whether in knowledges, truths or fictions), powers that are clearly instrumental in the oppression of women, and others, explicit where they must normally function implicitly” (Grosz, 1989, p. 37).

According to Grosz, Derrida’s “development of the concept of *différance*” furthermore, “has become emblematic of a powerful trajectory within feminist theory, distinguished from liberal struggles for equality. In recognising the limits of equivalences within the masculine (if masculinity is oppressive, why aspire to it as an ideal?), many feminists have instead directed their attentions towards developing autonomous definitions of woman and femininity. This autonomy, at least for some feminists, finds a source in the Derridean notion of *différance*” (Grosz, 1989, p. 37).

And finally, Derrida’s “focus on the irreducible textuality of discourses”... confirms feminism’s interest “not simply in women as the object of speculation and knowledges, but in the metaphors of femininity, excess, materiality and play in the production of knowledges” (Grosz, 1989, p. 37).

In other words, Derrida’s work on the one hand shows how reading is an inevitably political act and therefore an exercise in power relations, or, at least a negotiation of power relations. On the other hand, Derrida’s work has allowed feminists a new way of exploring their identity as well undertaking a much more thoroughgoing critique of the very practices of knowledge production. That is to say, Derrida’s work facilitates the emergence of a radical politics that names the tyranny of the One to be also the tyranny, among others, of patriarchy and phallogocentrism.

Grosz (1997) provides a similarly brief but handy overview of some of the key objections to Derrida's work voiced by feminist scholarship over the years. One of the oft-repeated criticisms against Derrida is that he "speaks in the name of, for, or as a feminine subject in a mode of male appropriation of women's right to speak" and that "along with Deleuze and others, wants to occupy just the very speaking position that women have finally produced for themselves..." (Grosz, 1997, p. 82-83).

Another point of concern is how Derrida places "deconstruction in a position oppositional to feminism, a position of structural domination over feminist concerns". Grosz cites Margaret Whitford especially as advancing this line of reasoning: "In the opposition which he sets up between deconstruction and feminism, there is no question for Derrida of privileging the subordinate term, since it would leave him without a place to speak"... (Grosz, 1997, p. 83-84).

A third bone of contention remains Derrida's alleged disregard of the practicalities around women's mundane and ordinary experiences of disempowerment. In other words, Deconstruction, "remains both elitist and unrelated to power struggles that function in more mundane and everyday terms" (Grosz, 1997, p. 84).

For his feminist critics, then, Derrida does a disservice to the cause of feminism when he pits it in a binary relation with deconstruction—where deconstruction is always the positive term and feminism, another form of logocentrism. They allege that Derrida's theories camouflage and distract from the myriad ways in which women daily experience systemic oppression. And in doing so, they assert that Derrida unfortunately becomes one more variant of patriarchal power that actually muzzles flesh-and-blood women while philosophising about the "idea of woman" or, speaking for and as women.

Ultimately, then, it is for each one of us to determine for ourselves, depending on the specificity of our needs and location, whether or not we see value in the potential solidarity between feminism and deconstruction. What remains indisputable is the many ways in which Derrida has challenged and stimulated feminist thinking for the last many decades.

6.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have focussed in some depth on Derridean thought. Through a synoptic overview of his life and works we have first outlined the importance of Derrida as an intellectual whose work has significantly influenced contemporary Western poststructuralist and postmodern thinking. We have then tried to grasp some of the central tenets of Derridean thinking through an exposition of the ideas found in one of his earlier essays, i.e. "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Science." This was followed by a closer scrutiny of the term deconstruction. On the one hand, we have sought to illuminate the debates and controversies around this term, its origins and different significance in Europe and North America. On the other, we have tried to highlight Derrida's own complex, at times ambivalent as well as contradictory, representation and deployment of it. Given how "woman" has been one of the words proposed as a substitute for deconstruction in Derridean thought, we have then taken a closer look at Derrida's thinking on gender identity and politics. Finally, and in the light of Derrida's statements on the question of woman and feminism, we have read of some of the salient ways in which Derrida may be useful for

feminist purposes as well the chief ways in which he has been debunked and/or criticised by feminist thinkers. It is hoped that this unit has equipped you to critically engage and or adapt Derridean thinking when tackling not only theoretical questions of gender identity, but also practical problems of feminist politics.

6.8 GLOSSARY

Bricolage : “describes an asystematic or creative approach to meaning, such that the meaning of a cultural practice or a literary text is produced unpremeditatedly, by making use of whatever happens to be at hand in order to see what ‘works’” (Lucy, 2004, p.133). Bricolage is the opposite of what Strauss, according to Derrida understands by “engineering (or scientific) discourse,” which proceeds according to unvarying rules and inflexible methods of analysis that enable the engineer or the scientist to solve a problem not by trial and error, but through the rigorous application of rational thought. In this way the engineer or the scientist appears to be the author of his own discourse, sole progenitor of an idea, a theory or a solution” (Lucy, 2004, p.133) However, as Derrida points out, insofar as bricolage is the “form of creative thought in general..., the absolutely uncreative rationality of the engineer is a ‘myth’ created by bricolage” (Lucy, 2004, p. 134). In other words, “bricolage is typical of every discourse” (Lucy, 2004, p. 134).

Différance : a neologism combining difference and deferral. “Along with deconstruction, this is one of the names Derrida uses to describe his own techniques of reading philosophic and logocentric texts. In his work, the term refers to three related concepts: first, to the movement or energy preconditioning the creation of binary oppositions. It is the unacknowledged ground of the opposition between identity (or sameness) and difference. In this sense, *différance* precedes oppositions. Second, it refers to an excess or an unincorporated remainder which resists the imperative of binary organisation. *Différance* is both as well as neither identity and difference. In this sense, *différance* exceeds binary oppositions. And third, it is the name of Derrida’s own procedures for reading and locating this *différance*. The term thus refers to a difference within difference itself, a difference which distinguishes difference from distinction, a different difference from that which opposes identity” (Grosz, 1989, p. xvii)

Il n’y a pas de : Occurring in “...That Dangerous Supplement...” hors-texte (Derrida, 1994, p. 158), the phrase is often translated into English as “there is nothing outside the text.” In this form it has achieved a kind of notoriety among people who have taken it to represent Derrida’s textualism and used it to mistakenly support him, but equally to mistakenly attack deconstruction. In an attempt to clarify matters Derrida himself suggested a different translation: “there is nothing outside context” (as ctd. in Royle, 2007, p. 65). Alternatively, he states “there is nothing but context” (as ctd. in Royle, 2007, p. 65). To quote Royle (2007), “context” here means “speech, life, the world, the real, history, and what not” (p. 65). Deconstruction through such a lens would be “the effort to take this limitless context into account, to pay the sharpest and broadest

attention possible to context, and thus to an incessant movement of recontextualisation” (as ctd. in Royle, 2007, p. 65).

Logocentrism : Logocentrism “designate[s] the dominant form of meta phonocentricism physics in western thought. The logos, logic, reason, knowledge, represents a singular and unified conceptual order, one which seems to grasp the presence or immediacy of things. Logocentrism is a system of thought centred around the dominance of this singular logic of presence. It is a system, which seeks beyond signs and representation, the real and the true, the presence of being, of knowing and reality, to the mind—an access to concepts and things in their pure, unmediated form. Logocentric systems rely heavily on logic of identity which is founded on the exclusion and binary polarisation of difference” (Grosz, 1989, p. xix). Linked with logocentrism is phonocentrism, i.e., the philosophical bias that valorises speech over writing as an authentic marker of self-presence—“because speech implies immediacy. In speech meaning is apparently immanent, above all when, using the inner voice of consciousness, we speak to ourselves.... [U]nlike writing, which is hopelessly mediated, speech is linked to the apparent moment and place of presence and for this reason has had priority over writing” (Sarup, 1993, p. 36).

Nature/culture : a binary that has been a feature of western binary philosophical thought systems from at least the Sophists onward. Levi Strauss, Derrida says, both uses the nature/culture binary and problematizes it through a focus on incest taboo. According to Strauss, Derrida explains, that which is “universal” and “spontaneous” belongs to the category of nature, while that which is contingent on a set of norms, and therefore, culturally variable, belongs to the category of culture. Strauss calls the incest prohibition a scandal because it is both natural—being universal, and cultural—being rule-governed and different from place to place in what/who exactly it proscribes (Derrida, 2004, p. 93-94).

Phallogocentrism : or phallogocentrism is a form of logocentrism where the phallus stands in for logos. “The term refers to the ways in which patriarchal systems of representation always submit women to models and images defined by and for men.... There are three forms phallogocentrism generally takes: whenever women are represented as the opposites or negatives of men; whenever they represented in terms the same as or similar to men; and whenever they are represented as men’s complements.... When [any of these] occurs, two sexual symmetries... are reduced to one (the male), which takes it upon itself to adequately represent the other” (Grosz, 1989, p. xx).

Play : a rough English translation of the French word “jeu” which could mean “play” as well as “give.” Many critics state that it is mistake to confuse Derrida’s use of the word “play” with total untrammelled linguistic free play. Rather, ““play”” for Derrida, they say, “means something like ‘give’ or ‘tolerance’ (the tolerance within a finely tuned engine, for example, or the give in a taut length of rope), which works against ideas of self-sufficiency and absolute completion” (Lucy, 2004, p. 95) Play is a “disruption of presence” because the “identity of a thing is

[achieved]... within ‘a system of differences and the movement of ... a chain or series of ‘signifying and substitutive’ marks... This system is the play of presences and absences (Lucy, 2004, p. 95).

Jacques Derrida

Sous Rature : translates as under erasure. Derrida borrows this concept from Martin Heidegger, “who often crossed out the word Being...and let both deletion and word stand because the word was inadequate yet necessary” (Sarup, 1993, p. 33). “To put a term ‘sous rature’ is to write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion. The idea is this: since the word is inaccurate, or, rather, inadequate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary it remains legible” (Sarup, 1993, p. 33).

Trace : Derrida gives this term a specialised meaning which is suggested by Freud’s insights in the “Note upon the ‘Mystic Writing Pad.’” Derrida uses trace “to signify...that there is no simple sense in which linguistic signs are either present or absent. According to Derrida, every sign...contains a ‘trace’ of other signs which differ from itself. But, paradoxically, the ‘trace’ is not there; it is potentially inherent, or present by virtue of its absence, just as absence denotes the possibility of presence. No sign is complete in itself. One sign leads to another via the ‘trace’—indefinitely” (Cuddon, 1998, p. 924). Trace is one of those multi- coded Derridean words that double up for deconstruction.

6.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Discuss the key Derridean concepts and arguments advanced in “Structure, Sign and Play.” How is the essay a critique of Western epistemological traditions?
- 2) Explain why you think Derrida was keen to separate his understanding of deconstruction from how the term came to be employed in the US. Analyse the implications of Derrida’s many statements on deconstruction.
- 3) Clarify Derrida’s position on the question of woman and feminism.
- 4) To what extent do you agree with the feminist unease regarding Derridean thinking? Give reasons for your answer.
- 5) Elaborate on some of the ways in which Derrida might be considered useful for feminist purposes.

6.10 REFERENCES

Benhabib, Seyla (1995). *Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance. Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange.*(Eds.) Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, Nancy Fraser with Introduction by Linda J. Nicholson. New York and London: Routledge.

Braidotti, Rosi (1991). *Patterns of Dissonance: A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy.* (Trans.) E. Guild. Oxford: Polity Press.

Cornell, Drucilla (1995). *Rethinking the Time of Feminism. Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange.* (Eds.) Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, Nancy Fraser with Introduction by Linda J. Nicholson. New York and London: Routledge.

- Cuddon, J. A. (1998). *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Derrida, Jacques (1979). *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*. (Trans.) Barbara Harlow. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1982). *Choreographies Jacques Derrida & Christie V. McDonald*. Interview. *Diacritics* 12, 66-76.
- Derrida, Jacques (1984). *Deconstruction and the Other*. Interview by Richard Kearney. *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*. Richard Kearney. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1985). *Deconstruction in America*. Interview by James Creech, Peggy Kamuf, & Jane Todd. *Critical Exchange* 17, 1-33.
- Derrida, Jacques (1988a). *Letter to a Japanese Friend*. Derrida and Différance. (Eds.) David Wood & Robert Bernasconi. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1988b). *Limited, Inc.* (Trans.) Samuel Welsen. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1992). *Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority. Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*. (Ed.) Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld & Benjamin N. Cardozo. New York and London: Routledge.
- Derrida, Jacques (1994). *Of Grammatology*. (Trans.) Chakravorty Gayatri Spivak. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Derrida, Jacques (1995). *The Time is Out of Joint. Deconstruction Is/in America: A New Sense of the Political*. (Ed.) Anselm Haverkamp. New York and London: New York University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (2004). *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences. Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. (Eds.) David Lodge with Nigel Wood. 2nd edition. Delhi: Pearson Education Ltd.
- Eagleton, Terry (2000). *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. 2nd edition. Delhi: Maya Blackwell & Doaba Publications.
- Elam, Diane (2001). *Feminism and Deconstruction. The Cambridge History of Literary Criticisms: Twentieth Century Historical, Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*. (Eds.) Christa Knellwolf & Christopher Norris. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Grosz, Elizabeth (1989). *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*. St Leonards, Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Grosz, Elizabeth (1997). *Ontology and Equivocation: Derrida's Politics of Sexual Difference. Feminist Interpretations of Jacques Derrida*. (Ed.) Nancy J. Holland. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press.
- Hartman, Geoffrey (2004). *Preface. Deconstruction and Criticism: Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Hartman, J Hillis Miller*. (Ed.) Harold Bloom. London and New York: Continuum.
- McQuillan, Martin (2000). (Ed.) *Deconstruction: A Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Lucy, Niall (2004). *A Derrida Dictionary*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Jacques Derrida

Royle, Nicholas (2007). *Jacques Derrida*. Routledge Critical Thinkers. London and New York: Routledge.

Sarup, Madan (1993). *An Introductory Guide to Post-structuralism and Postmodernism*. 2nd edition. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press.

Spivak, Chakravorty, Gayatri (1994). *Translator's Preface*. Of *Grammatology*. Jacques Derrida. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Wolfreys, Julian (2008). *Derrida: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London and New York: Continuum.

6.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

Cornell, Drucilla (1991). *Beyond Accommodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction and the Law*. New York: Routledge.

Elam, Diane (1994). *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms en Abyeme*. London: Routledge.

Feder, Ellen K., Mary C Rawlinson and Emily Zakin (1997). (Eds.) *Derrida and Feminism: Recasting the Question of Woman*. New York and London: Routledge.

Holland, Nancy J. (1997). (Ed.) *Feminist Interpretations of Jacques Derrida*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press.

Irwin, Jones (2010). *Derrida and the Writing of the Body*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

ignou
THE PEOPLE'S
UNIVERSITY

UNIT 7 MICHEL FOUCAULT

Structure

- 7.1 Introduction
- 7.2 Objectives
- 7.3 Life and Works of Michel Foucault
- 7.4 Foucault and Power/Knowledge
- 7.5 Foucault and Ethics
 - 7.5.1 The Ethical Turn
 - 7.5.2 Defining Ethics as Care of the Self
 - 7.5.3 Freedom and Ethics
- 7.6 Foucault and Feminism
 - 7.6.1 Feminist Reservations Regarding Foucault
 - 7.6.2 Mixed Reactions
 - 7.6.3 Feminists in Defence of Foucault
- 7.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 7.8 Unit End Questions
- 7.9 References
- 7.10 Suggested Readings

7.1 INTRODUCTION

You have already been briefly introduced to the work of Michel Foucault in an earlier Unit on (see MWG 101, Block 3, Unit 13, Section 13.3.3). Before you begin reading this Unit, you may find it helpful to review what you have read earlier. In this Unit, we will examine Foucault's work much more closely with a view to better appreciate its implications for questions of gender identity and politics. To this end, we will first attempt to clarify Foucault's influential formulation of the power-knowledge coupling. Extending your prior exposure to Foucauldian ethics, we will then study Foucault's elaboration of an ethical praxis and politics deriving from the technologies of the self. Finally, we will explore the implications of Foucault's work on power, truth, subjectivity and ethics for women and gender politics through a synoptic account of various feminist responses to Foucauldian thinking on these matters.

7.2 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading this Unit, you should learn about:

- The significance of Michel Foucault's work within the context of contemporary Western thought;
- Foucault's understanding of power;
- The ethical preoccupations of the later Foucault;
- Foucault's idea of a useful politics;

- The different feminist responses to Foucault’s work; and
- The relative usefulness of Foucault for feminism.

7.3 LIFE AND WORKS OF MICHEL FOUCAULT

Along with Derrida, Michel Foucault is one of the philosophers who achieved trans-Atlantic recognition and indelibly marked contemporary Western intellectual thought. He not only got written about in the November 1981 issue of TIME magazine as “France’s philosopher of power,” a survey also found that he was, in fact, the most cited scholar in the field of Humanities in the first decade of the 21st century.

Foucault was born on 15th Oct 1926 in the provincial town of Poitiers, France. He had two other siblings, an older sister and a younger brother. Ceding to the tradition in his family, Foucault as the eldest son was christened Paul, after his father and grandfather, both of whom were surgeons. His mother, however, hyphenated Paul with Michel, so that Foucault in the early years of his life went by the name of Paul-Michel Foucault.

By all accounts, Foucault hailed from an educated, affluent family that was also well connected. Both his parents were ambitious for their children and not shy about using their connections to help their offspring—a fact that considerably eased Michel Foucault’s early years till he became established in his own right. Foucault did very well at studies through most of his school years, studying first at Lycée Henry IV at Poitiers and later at the College Saint Stanislas. He qualified for the university by passing his bac in 1943, but while his father wanted him to study medicine, Foucault aspired to join the prestigious ENS to study philosophy. This meant successfully negotiating a tough entrance examination. Foucault prepared for a year to achieve his objective, studying at the Lycée Henri IV, Paris. He joined ENS in 1946.

At ENS, Foucault studied under Merleau Ponty, Althusser, and others. He received his licence de philosophie (1948), the equivalent of a BA degree, a licence de psychologie (1949), and cleared his aggregation de philosophie in 1952 after initially failing it in 1950. In the same year, Foucault did a brief teaching stint at the University of Lille, while getting a Diplome de psychopathologie from the Institut de Psychologie, Paris. Through Althusser’s support, Foucault also got an opportunity to teach psychology at ENS and have, among others, Jacques Derrida attend his lectures. From 1955 on, however, Foucault chose to undertake a series of foreign assignments—in 1955, first, as director of the Maison de France, University of Uppsala, then in 1958, at Warsaw, Poland, as a French cultural attaché and, in 1959, at the Institut Francais, Hamburg. He returned to France in 1960 to teach psychology in the philosophy department of Clermont-Ferrand. Foucault remained here till 1966, when he followed his long-time partner, Daniel Defert, to Tunisia (Defert had been posted to Tunisia for compulsory military service in 1964). Foucault took up the chair of philosophy at the University of Tunisia. In 1968 he returned to take charge of the Philosophy Department at a newly set-up university at Vincennes, Paris. While Foucault missed the student uprisings of 1968 for the most part, his radical stewardship at Vincennes stirred up quite a bit of controversy. By 1970, however, Foucault had secured election to the premier Collège de France, where he remained till his death as chair in the “History of Systems of Thought.”

Though Foucault only earned his doctorate in 1961, his first publication dates back to 1954. *Mental Illness and Personality*, a publication Foucault later modified and eventually distanced himself from, was followed by a series of path-breaking books—from *History of Madness (or Madness and Civilisation)* to *Birth of a Clinic*; from *The Order of Things* to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*; from *Discipline and Punish* to the multivolume and incomplete *History of Sexuality*, the fourth volume of which Foucault was working on at the time of his death—that cemented Foucault's position as one of the foremost contemporary thinkers in France. Despite disavowing labels: "I have never been a Freudian, I have never been a Marxist and I have never been a structuralist [or poststructuralist]" (Raulet as cited in Gane, 1986, p. 3), Foucault was never shy of activism. Early in the 1950s he had been a member of the French Communist Party, albeit only for a couple of years. Later on, Foucault's activism saw him become founder member of the prison information group GIP to expose conditions of penal incarceration in France; participate in protests against General Franco's atrocities against his opponents; criticize the Communist regime of Poland; be the treasurer of the international branch of Solidarity, a trade union association; report on the Iranian Islamic revolution for an Italian publication, among others. Since his position at the Collège de France required him only to deliver a set of research-based lectures annually, Foucault also managed to tour internationally, to South America, Japan, the US. In fact, at the time of his death he had an arrangement to teach part of the year at the University of California, Berkeley.

Foucault died in June 1984. If his life—suicide attempts, fear of lapsing into madness, his early conflicted feelings about his homosexuality, complexes about his looks, enthusiasm for "limit experiences," experimentation with, and endorsement of drugs and S/M practices—was colourful and controversial, his death was no less. Foucault was one of the earliest high profile casualties of AIDS and it has been alleged that despite knowing his diagnosis Foucault continued to indulge in unprotected sex, thus exposing his partners to a potentially fatal infection (see Miller, 2000). It's impossible to determine Foucault's culpability with any certainty so many years after his death, especially when we also remember how little was known about AIDS at the time, even in the medical community.

As V. Y. Mudimbe (1992) points out, Foucault's life and legacy contains many contradictions. "Foucault's image today is generally one of an anti-institutional militant. But this contradicts the whole of his career: all his positions abroad were made possible by powerful friends, and his election to the Collège de France was the result of politicking on the part of people who did not share the ideological opinions of Foucault the philosopher and the activist. At the time of his death, bureaucratic Parisian projects were underway to send him abroad (to Japan or the United States) as a cultural attaché." However, "[b]eyond the play of contradictory images, one meets a philosopher, a 'saint,' simultaneously modest and ambitious, who was critical enough not to become a Jesuit and sincere enough not to play systematically by the game of the French bourgeoisie that was his own milieu" (Mudimbe, 1992, p. 127). Intellectually, Foucault attempted to break away from the phenomenological, existentialist, Marxist and structuralist thinking that dominated the French intellectual scene at the time. He looked, rather, to Nietzsche, Heidegger, Canguilhem and Bachelard, among others, to forge an alternative praxis. His work has enjoyed a wide cross-

disciplinary readership and influence. Its value has variously been deemed to lie in the way in which it “successfully bridges the divides between structural and phenomenological approaches... or between structural and historical analyses... or between Marxist and critical theory” (Gane, 1986, p. 3). However, Foucault has also come in for criticism. Perry Anderson, for instance, is scathing in his assessment of Foucault’s impact on Marxist thinking (see Anderson, 1983). Habermas, Taylor, Rorty, Derrida, and some feminists have also been critical of various Foucauldian formulations.

Foucault’s own summation of his body of work perceives “three axes” of genealogy at play: “First, a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to truth, through which we constitute ourselves as subjects of knowledge; second, a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to a field of power through which we constitute ourselves as subjects acting on others; third, a historical ontology in relation to ethics through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents” (Foucault, 2000b, p. 262). Keeping these points in mind, let us attempt, in the next two sections, to flesh out some of the main ideas in Foucault’s engagements with the power-knowledge coupling on the one hand, and with ethics and subjectivity, on the other.

7.4 FOUCAULT AND POWER/KNOWLEDGE

Foucault’s early works are dedicated to the “archaeology of knowledge.” He achieved this by undertaking a historical scrutiny of “discursive formations” (large body of statements or texts hierarchically ordered by particular sets of protocols and procedures of production) and the epistemes (underlying, unconscious conditions of possibility for knowledge production at any given time) that gave rise to them. However, Foucault’s most influential as well as contentious articulations have been about power. Around the time of *Discipline and Punish* (1979) and after, Foucault began to develop a more sustained enquiry into the nature and modes of power and its imbrication with knowledge and truth. What resulted was a distinctive thoroughgoing analytic of power and an influential rewriting of its conjunction with knowledge.

According to Foucault, the dominant discourse on power in the Humanities reveals significant lacuna and misrepresentation. On the one hand, “Mechanisms of power in general have never been much studied by history.

- History has studied those who held power—anecdotal histories of kings and generals.
- Contrasted with this there has been the history of economic processes and infrastructures.
- Again, distinct from this, we have had histories of institutions, of what has been viewed as a superstructural level in relation to the economy.

But power in its strategies, at once general and detailed, and its mechanisms, has never been studied” (Foucault, 1980c, p. 51).

This neglect in the study of how power functions, is compounded by a persistent misreading of the relation between power and truth. “What has been studied even less” Foucault says, is the relation between power and knowledge, the articulation of each on the other. It has been a tradition for humanism to assume that once someone gains power he ceases to know. Power makes men mad, and those who govern are blind; only those who keep their distance from power,

who are in no way implicated in tyranny, shut up in their Cartesian poele, their room, their meditations, only they can discover the truth. (Foucault, 1980c, p. 51)

The dichotomous reading of power and knowledge/truth has been a salient feature of Western scholarship, which, Foucault asserts, needs to be interrogated:

[T]he great myth according to which truth never belongs to political power.... needs to be dispelled. It is this myth which Nietzsche began to demolish by showing, in the numerous texts already cited, that, behind all knowledge (savoir), behind all attainment of knowledge (connaissance), what is involved is a struggle for power. Political power is not absent from knowledge, it is woven together with it. (Foucault, 1994c, p. 32)

According to Foucault, traditionally power has been analysed through two schemas:

- i) the economistic “contract—oppression schema,” and
- ii) the domination—repression or war—repression schema” (Foucault, 1980e, p. 92).

The former is based on the idea that political power follows a legal and contractual model of exchange (Foucault, 1980e, p. 88). In such a model “power is taken to be a right, which one is able to possess like a commodity, and which can in consequence transfer or alienate...through a legal act.” In other words, “Power is that concrete power which every individual holds, and whose partial or total cession enables political power or sovereignty to be established” (Foucault, 1980e, p. 88).

The second non-economist analyses of power combines two strands of thinking. Foucault calls the former Reich’s hypothesis. This hypothesis “argues that the mechanisms of power are those of repression.” The second one, which he calls Nietzsche’s hypothesis, argues that the basis of the relationship of power lies in “the hostile engagement of forces” (Foucault, 1980e, p. 91). While drawing inspiration from Nietzsche, among others, Foucault sets about providing a necessary corrective to these prevalent misunderstandings of power in the Western world.

Foucault’s single most significant intervention on power remains in radically rewriting this age-old script by emphasising the function of power as a positive force. The way Foucault puts it, “...power would be a fragile thing if its only function were to repress, ... If, on the contrary, power is strong, this is because... it produces effects at the level of desire— and also at the level of knowledge. Far from preventing knowledge, power produces it” (Foucault, 1980a, p. 59). As for what is power itself, Foucault asserts that power qua power is a myth: “Power in the substantive sense, ‘le’ pouvoir, doesn’t exist.... In reality power means relations, a more or less organised, hierarchical, co-ordinated cluster of relations” (Foucault, 1980b, p. 199). In other words, “there is no such entity as power, with or without a capital letter: global, massive or diffused; concentrated or distributed. Power exists only as exercised by some on others, only when it is put into action, even though, of course, it is inscribed in a field of sparse available possibilities underpinned by permanent structures” (Foucault, 1994b, p. 340).

Clarifying the specific nature of power relationships, Foucault maintains that power is not to be confused with violence: “A relationship of violence acts upon a body or upon things; it forces, it bends, it breaks, it destroys or it closes off all possibilities.” A power relationship, on the other hand, requires that over which power is exercised be “recognized and maintained to the very end as a subject who acts.” Also, far from shutting off options, a power relationship enables “a whole field of responses, reactions, results and possible inventions” (Foucault, 1994b, p. 340) to remain in play.

Foucault also emphasized the necessary and inextricable inter-articulation of power and knowledge/truth. He claims that “truth isn’t outside power, or lacking in power ... Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power” (Foucault, 1980d, p. 131). Further defining his meaning, Foucault asserts that “‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it” (Foucault, 1980d, p. 133).

Foucault credits his understanding of power/knowledge to a distinctive methodology he adopted. According to Foucault, instead of asking what and why with regard to power, he concentrated on the how of power: “‘How is it exercised?’ and ‘What happens when individuals exert (as we say) power over others?’” (Foucault, 1994b, p. 337). The chief advantage of pursuing this trajectory of thought is that it does not a priori assume the object which it sets out to study. Rather, it is based on “the suspicion that power as such does not exist” (Foucault, 1994b, p. 336).

In practical terms, Foucault argues that any effective study of power relations as it obtains at a given historical moment would clarify the following five key matters:

- “The system of differentiations that permits one to act upon the actions of others...”;
- “The types of objectives pursued by those who act upon the action of others...”;
- The “instrumental modes” through which power is exercised;
- The “forms of institutionalization” in evidence; and finally
- “The degrees of rationalization” that mark the exercise and ambit of power (Foucault, 1994b, p. 344).

Thus, Foucault studies the way in which power has been exercised at various times through Western history, all the while proclaiming why it is imperative to engage with the operations of power. Foucault attempts neither to naturalize the particular power relations that exist in a society, nor to make of power an unassailable core of society. Rather, through his analysis, he seeks to draw out the relations between power and freedom in the form of a political task (Foucault, 1994b, p. 343). Thus, one of the many significant insights to emerge from Foucault’s researches concerns the nature of power in the modern Western world.

Check Your Progress:

i) What are the two models of understanding power? Briefly explain each one in your own words.

ii) What is Foucault's most radical contribution to the study of power?

iii) How does Foucault understand the relationship between power and knowledge/truth?

Discipline: The New Modality of Power

According to Foucault, from roughly the eighteenth century onwards a new modality of power comes to the fore. He calls this discipline. According to him, the modern state is a new form of the Christian pastoral power, which is “salvation-oriented” (as opposed to political power)...; “oblativistic (as opposed to the principle of sovereignty)”; ... “individualizing (as opposed to legal power)” and is ‘linked with a production of truth—the truth of the individual himself’ (Foucault, 1994b, p. 333). In the modern world, this type of pastoral power witnesses a change of objectives.

- It was not oriented towards salvation in the next world but in this world through ensuring health, security, etc.
- Likewise the administrators of pastoral power undergo a telling increase extending to various state functionaries and experts.
- Further, there is a bifocal accumulation of knowledge about man around the population/individual axis.

In addition to highlighting the diffuse nature of power relations in the modern world, Foucault also comments on the specific nature of the power/ truth/ knowledge nexus that prevails. Based on his analysis, Foucault proposes genealogy as the preferred method of resistant practice to be used by the (modern, class and professionally located) specific intellectual. Foucault contends that genealogy is emancipatory insofar as it excavates the critiques of subaltern knowledge bodies and uses these against the reductive and repressive, homogenizing and hierarchising tendencies of modern scientific discourse. What genealogy “really does is to entertain the claims to attention of local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a Unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchise and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects” (Foucault, 1980e, p. 83). The task for the modern intellectual is to disengage “the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time” (Foucault, 1980d, p. 133).

Whether one agrees with the particulars of Foucault’s assertions on power, truth and knowledge or not, what is beyond debate is that it constitutes a new perspective on modern social relations. This perspective not only proved influential among scholars, thinkers and practitioners across disciplines internationally, but also provided the inspiration for a new politics. In the next section, let us focus on Foucault’s developing view of power in the form of ethical praxis and subjectivity.

Check Your Progress:

i) In what way, according to Foucault, is the modern state a form of Christian pastoral power?

ii) How, or in what form, does the disciplinary mode of power operate?

iii) Explain the term “subjugated knowledges.”

7.5 FOUCAULT AND ETHICS

The “ethical turn” in Foucault’s works is to be observed roughly from 1980 on to the time of his death a few years later. While others have called it a “break” from his earlier preoccupations, Foucault speaks about it more as an evolution and elaboration of his older concerns rather than any radical rupture. Let us look at this notion more closely.

7.5.1 The Ethical Turn

To the extent that the earlier Foucault attended to the coercive practices of power and the later Foucault concentrates on the practices of self- articulation, truth and freedom, there is certainly a shift of focus in his work. Foucault grants as much. However, Foucault also claims he “has always been interested in the problem of the relationship between subject and truth.... What I wanted to try to show was how the subject constituted itself, in one specific form or another, as a mad or healthy subject, as a delinquent or nondelinquent subject, through certain practices that were also games of truth, practices of power, and so on” (Foucault, 2000a, p. 289-90). This section offers you a synoptic introduction to Foucault’s later engagement with the question of ethics.

Foucault’s most notable engagement with ethics occurs in the context of Classical Greco-Roman sexuality in his works, The History of Sexuality vols 2 and 3 or The Use of Pleasure (1992) and Care of the Self (1986), respectively. According to Foucault, in order to fathom the modern conceptualization of the human being as “a subject of a ‘sexuality,’ it was essential first to determine how for centuries, Western man had been brought to recognize himself as a subject of desire” (Foucault, 1992, p. 6). This line of inquiry led him to engage with the repeated evidence of the “problematization” of sexual conduct in Western history.

For Foucault, the early sexual problematic from classic antiquity to the beginning of Christianity offered the earliest examples of the “techniques of the self” (Foucault, 1992, p. 10) and ethical praxis. Most notably the impetus here was not any universalizing proscription. Rather, the sexual ethic addressed precisely those domains in which men had social license to exercise their claims, thus making it “the elaboration and stylization of an activity in the exercise of its powers and the practice of its liberties” (Foucault, 1992, p. 23). Overall, Foucault describes his endeavour in these texts and his later years in general to be writing “[t]he genealogy of the subject as a subject of ethical actions, or the genealogy of desire as an ethical problem” (Foucault, 2000b, p. 266).

Check Your Progress:

i) When did the “ethical turn” occur in Foucault’s writings? How did he talk about this “turn” in his writings?

ii) Explain the term “arts of existence”?

iii) How does Foucault explain the link between sexuality and ethics?

7.5.2 Defining Ethics as Care of the Self

Foucault defines ethics as the “relations with oneself”; as “the government of the self by oneself...” (Foucault, 2000d, p. 88); as the “technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality” (Foucault, 2000e, p. 225). Foucault investigates ancient Greco-Roman and early Christian ethics chiefly through the range of practices comprehended by the dictum *epimeleisthai sautou* or “to take care of yourself,” to take ‘care of the self,’ ‘to be concerned, to take care of yourself’” (Foucault, 2000e, p. 226). While clarifying that is not to say “ethics is synonymous with the care of the self,” he argues that “in antiquity, ethics as the conscious practice of freedom has revolved around this fundamental imperative” (Foucault, 2000a, p. 285).

According to Foucault, the modern West is more familiar with the Delphic admonition “Know yourself.” In antiquity however, knowing yourself could not happen without taking care of the self. Foucault shows the different ways in which classical Greco-Roman and early Christian cultures practice care of the self. However, in so doing, he also meticulously notes the changes and transformations that the meanings, actions and activities that the care of the self represents undergo—from its Grecian manifestation to its Roman and Christian avatars. Foucault tracks these continuities and discontinuities in terms of the four different aspects that make up the ethical relation with oneself. These are:

- Ethical substance or the aspect or part of oneself that is concerned with ethical conduct, for instance, is it feelings, or desire or pleasure, etc.
- Mode of subjectification or “the way in which people are invited or incited to recognize their moral obligations” (Foucault, 2000b, p. 264), for example, is it god’s commandment, or rational law or natural order, etc.
- The means of self-transformation that are used to turn one into an ethical subject—is it exercising moderation, is it cleansing our desires, or actively using them, etc.
- Finally, telos or the ideal we aspire towards when we behave ethically—is it purity, immortality, harmony, freedom, self-mastery, etc. (Foucault, 2000b, p. 263-65).

Foucault’s chief conclusions are two-fold. First, despite differences in ways of living these codes, “nearly the same restrictive, the same prohibitive code” exists among the Greek, Roman and early Christian societies (Foucault, 2000b, p. 254). Second, Foucault believes the difference can be attributed to the fact that the pagan ethic’s focus was aesthetic: “it was a personal choice for a small elite. The reason for making this choice was the will to live a beautiful life...” (Foucault, 2000b, p. 254).

Foucault contends that the dual influences of Christianity and Cartesian rationality have all but eclipsed the classical expression of the cultivation of the self. Consequently, the modern Western world fixates on desire and ignores pleasure and the idea of asceticism (self-restraint) vis-à-vis truth. The answer though is not any simple-minded revival of the older ethic. Foucault is clear that the “Greek ethics of pleasure is linked to a virile society, to dissymmetry, exclusion of the other [woman or slave], an obsession with penetration, and a kind of threat of being dispossessed of your own energy” (Foucault, 2000b, p. 258). The modern need, Foucault suggests, is for an ethics of pleasure built on reciprocity “We have to create new pleasure” (Foucault, 2000c, p. 166) and actively aestheticize our lives.

Check Your Progress:

i) How does Foucault define ethics?

ii) What are the problems with the modern and pagan ethics, according to Foucault?

iii) What, according to you, would be a desirable ethics for the future?

7.5.3 Freedom and Ethics

In his last few lectures, Foucault identifies parrhesia (literally, “telling all”) or the practice of frank-speech as a particularly important component of the ethics and care of the self. Describing the relationship between ethics and

freedom, Foucault is emphatic that “[f]reedom is the ontological condition of ethics” (Foucault, 2000a, p. 284). Parrhesia is necessarily ethical but not all free “speech activity” is parrhesia. Foucault distinguishes parrhesia from rhetoric, prophecy and sage’s wisdom and says,

parrhesia is a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his own life through danger, a certain type of relation to himself or other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty. More precisely, parrhesia is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself). In parrhesia, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy. (Foucault, 1983, para.22)

Ultimately, for Foucault “Parrhesia is not a skill; it is something which is harder to define. It is a stance, a way of being which is akin to a virtue, a mode of action” (Foucault, 2011, 14). Indeed, though studied as a specific mode of truth-telling known in antiquity, Foucault finally sees his own and critical philosophy’s role (more generally) in modern times as impelled by parrhesia and the practice of freedom.

Now that we have understood Foucault’s formulations of power, knowledge, truth and ethics, let us turn to some feminist responses to these issues.

Check Your Progress:

i) How are freedom and ethics related?

ii) What is parrhesia? When is free speech parrhesia?

7.6 FOUCAULT AND FEMINISM

While Foucault did work and comment on sexuality, he never directly engaged with the subject of women in any sustained fashion. Despite this, Foucault has generated great interest among contemporary feminists. Foucault’s delineations of power/knowledge and ethical subjectivity, quite apart from his writings on sexuality, have drawn both praise and criticism from a range of feminist thinkers. Let us briefly discuss some of these feminist responses to Foucault.

7.6.1 Feminist Reservations Regarding Foucault

Feminist thinkers unconvinced by Foucault’s works have routinely voiced concerns that can be broadly enumerated under the following heads:

- Foucault’s rejection of norms and universalist imperatives—feminists ask what this means for any systematic analysis and evaluation.
- Foucault’s questioning of the idea of a Unitary, stable subject and subjectivity—feminists ask what this means for agency.

- Foucault's articulation of power—feminists ask what it means for politics, resistance and transformation.
- Foucault's disregard of gender and the specific subjectivity of women even when focussing on sexuality—feminists ask what this means for them and their politics and concerns.

Toril Moi (1985) is not alone in thinking that “The price for giving in to his [Foucault's] powerful discourse is nothing less than the depoliticisation of feminism” (Moi, 1985, p. 95).

Foucault himself has tried to allay some of these concerns, especially vis-à-vis power, which he states are based on a misunderstanding of his thoughts. It is often alleged, by feminists, among others, that Foucault's conception of power is totalising and leaves little room for any meaningful recourse against it. As Foucault (2000a) explains, “in human relationships, whether they involve verbal communication such as we are engaged in at this moment, or amorous, institutional, or economic relationships, power is always present.... These power relations are mobile, they can be modified, they are not fixed once and for all.” Consequently, “in power relations there is necessarily the possibility of resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, flight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation), there would be no power relations at all. This being the general form, I refuse to reply to the question I am sometimes asked: ‘But if power is everywhere, there is no freedom.’” His answer: “if there are relations of power in every social field, this is because there is freedom everywhere” (Foucault, 2000a, p. 292).

Foucault holds that conditions of power and powerlessness are never absolutes. Being palpable only in and as relations, they are, rather, constantly open to be written and rewritten. This, according to him, opens up a host of possibilities for us instead of the narrow range of options presented to us when we take power to be monolithic, substantive, and absolute.

Not everyone, however, is convinced by or heedful of these clarifications. Standpoint theorist, Nancy Hartsock (1990), for instance, alleges that “Foucault reproduces in his work the situation of the colonizer who resists (and in so doing renders his work inadequate and even irrelevant to the needs of the colonized or the dominated)” (Hartsock, 1990, p. 166). She contends that for Foucault “Power is everywhere, and so ultimately nowhere” (Hartsock, 1990, p. 170). This makes it systematically and socially useless for marginalised and oppressed people who are better off constructing a politics based on their lived, “minority” experience.

Monique Deveaux likewise feels Foucault is not equal to the requirements of feminist politics which “take[s] the delineation of women's oppression and the concrete transformation of society as central aims” (Deveaux, 1996, p. 212). She gives two reasons for her position: one, that Foucault's conceptualization of the subject tends to “erase women's specific experiences of power” and two, the inability of this “model of power to account for, much less articulate processes of empowerment” (p. 212). Taking Foucault's views that rape should be seen as ordinary assault and only the physical violence involved should be penalised as illustrative, she offers four further points to undercore his theoretical inability to understand either feminist concerns or women's realities. According to Deveaux, Foucault comes up short because a. he “falsely posits ‘free agents’ as a necessary feature of power”; b. “his analysis does not consider women's

internal barriers to agency and choice, as with the example of shame”; c. “it sets up a false dichotomy between power and violence, as illustrated by the continuum of anger and physical abuse experienced by a battered woman”; and d. “it does not question the fact that in many societies, men’s freedom ...is contingent upon women’s unfreedom...rather than on the presence of a freely maneuvering antagonist” (Deveaux, 1996, p. 225-26).

Others like Nancy Fraser voice reservations about Foucault’s rejection of humanism, asserting that he never offers a persuasive rationale for his thinking. In this context, she asks: “Supposing one abandons a foundationalist grounding of humanist values, then to what sort of nonfoundationalist justification can such values lay claim?” adding that Foucault never squarely faces this question (Fraser, 1996, 24). Instead, she observes that he tries to “displace it by insinuating that values can neither have nor require justification” (Fraser, 1996, p. 24). Thus, according to Fraser, Foucault did not produce “a satisfactory non-humanist political rhetoric” and asks, “whether Foucault’s rhetoric really does the job of distinguishing better from worse regimes of domination” (Fraser, 1996, p. 25). Put differently, Fraser feels that, on closer scrutiny, Foucault fails to deliver because Foucault’s studies lack clear standards of evaluation. Consequently, his assessments are not necessary and convincing conclusions so much as an articulation of subjective inclinations.

Check Your Progress:

- i) What are the four main points of concern for feminist critics of Foucault in general?

- ii) In what way, according to Foucault, have people misunderstood his theorisation of power?

- iii) What are some of the shortcomings of Foucault’s theorisation of power according to:
 - a) Nancy Hartsock
 - b) Monique Deveau
 - c) Nancy Fraser

7.6.2 Mixed Reactions

Many feminists are not so singularly censorious or pessimistic about Foucault. They exhibit mixed reactions: often criticising Foucault’s shortcomings, prejudices or oversights while appropriating different aspects of his work to serve their various feminist purposes and politics. Thus Terry Aladjem notes the absence of women in Foucault’s elaboration of the ethical care of the self (Aladjem, 1996, p. 287). Her conclusion about Foucault is far from dismissive on this count. She argues rather that “If he seems to dissolve the category of woman within power—which is dangerous—he has also begun to dissolve the very power that defines her as such” (Aladjem, 1996, p. 288). Similarly, Sandra Bartky finds Foucault’s elucidation of the many disciplinary grids in

the modern world subjecting human bodies to be particularly useful but she also asks “Where is the account of the disciplinary practices that engender the ‘docile bodies’ of women, bodies more docile than the bodies of men?” (Bartky, 1988, p. 63).

Foucault’s gender blindness becomes in many ways the point of departure for Teresa de Lauretis’ influential *Technologies of Gender*. Describing her project, she writes, “A starting point may be to think of gender along the lines of Michel Foucault’s theory of sexuality as a ‘technology of sex’” (Lauretis, 1987, p. 2). While acknowledging her debt to Foucault, Lauretis also makes it clear “that to think of gender as the product and the process of a number of social technologies, of techno-social or bio-medical apparatus, is to have already gone beyond Foucault.” This is because, according to her, Foucault’s theory “excludes, though it does not preclude, the consideration of gender” (Lauretis, 1987, p. 3).

Naomi Schor repeats the double-move against Foucault. On the one hand, she insists that Foucault is gender blind: “the question of gender cannot be said to inform Foucault’s project” (Schor, 1989, p. 55). On the other hand, vis-à-vis his later works on sexual ethics she finds at least three aspects of interest to feminist scholars: “first, the scrupulous attention Foucault pays to the gender of the enunciating subject; second, the subtle way in which he decenters the ‘woman question’; and third and finally, the pride of place he accords a model of heterosexual relations based on reciprocity and mutual respect” (Schor, 1989, p. 54). Even in these later works and despite Foucault’s greater attention to questions of exclusion, Schor claims that two problems persist: “the woman who becomes in Foucault’s words, ‘the other par excellence’ is ‘the wife-woman’ and, furthermore, alterity is, of course, not specificity” (p. 57). In other words, she cautions against both the reduction and whitewashing of women’s particularity of experiences in Foucault’s ethical expositions. This ultimately leads her to wonder, “[a]t the risk of being a wallflower at the carnival of plural sexualities,” if “the discourse of sexual indifference/pure difference is not the last or (less triumphantly) the latest ruse of phallogentrism?” (Schor, 1989, p. 57).

Jon Simons also decries Foucault’s masculinist bias but then offers a startling reversal in the way the relationship between Foucault and feminism is usually posited. Taking issue with Foucault’s works on the “care of the self,” Simons writes that “Although subjectification, or assujettissement, is the focus of Foucault’s work, his gender blindness and androcentricism lead him, and perhaps his readers, to overlook its most significant manifestation. In none of his analyses of that ‘form of power which makes individuals subjects’ did Foucault pay any attention to women’s enormous role, especially as mothers, in the process of subjectification” (Simons, 1996, p. 179). According to him, Foucault’s “focus on disciplines that produce masculine rather than feminine bodies is implicitly a denial that we are all ‘of woman born’ and mostly by women raised.” Simons contends that “Foucault overlooks the significant subjectifying power of women as caretakers which, as feminist theorists have pointed out, offers the most concrete model of power as empowerment, constituting initially helpless infants as autonomous adults” (Simons, 1996, p. 179-80). Thereafter, Simons talks of “subversive mothering” as a significant part of feminist politics. He defines ‘subversive mothering’ as the attempt “to break simultaneously the confinement of women to mothering and caring subject positions while retaining the empowerment authorized by such positions” (Simons, 1996, p. 196-97).

Simons most important move is reserved for the last. “If the disruption of the correspondence between individualization and totalisation is a prerequisite for liberation, and if a feminist strategy of subversive mothering is integral to such disruption, then” he asks, “whether there can be a Foucauldian politics that is not feminist” (Simons, 1996, p. 205-06).

Check Your Progress:

Explain, in your own words, the responses of the following to Foucault:

- a) Terry Aladjem
- b) Teresa de Lauretis
- c) Naomi Schor
- d) Jon Simons

7.6.3 Feminists in Defence of Foucault

While the above provide more or less qualified support to Foucault’s writing, Foucault is also not without more unequivocal and enthusiastic defenders. Judith Butler (1990) and her rendering of sex as performative in *Gender Trouble* (1990) is one of the more obvious examples of Foucault’s theories being used by feminists. Susan Bordo applies Foucauldian notions of “docile bodies” (1989) being subjected to disciplinary controls and constructions in her study of anorexia nervosa and bulimia among women.

Honi Fern Haber, meanwhile, claims that “Foucault’s writings on the body and power challenge us to fight back with our bodies, to find new ways of meaning our bodies, and hence new ways of understanding ourselves and shaping our culture” (Haber, 1996, p.139). One way for women to recode traditional sex/gender inscriptions, Haber suggests is “with muscle” (p. 139). Speaking of the phenomenon of female body-builders, she writes, “in confusing accepted gender dichotomies, the body of the muscled woman problematizes seeing in a way that calls attention to the cultural presuppositions oppressing both men and women on an unconscious or ideological level” (Haber, 1996, p. 142).

Margaret A McLaren similarly finds great value and utility in Foucault’s ideas about subjectivity, power, knowledge and the body. Inspired by Foucault’s theories, she suggests “that consciousness-raising can be viewed as a feminist practice of the self... promot[ing] both individual and collective transformation.” How is such a proposition supported by Foucauldian thought? According to McLaren “Foucault’s conception of social norms articulates an important mediating structure between individual identity and social, political, and legal institutions. This link between individual identity and social institutions means that self-transformation is not simply an individual personal goal, but must involve structural, social and political change. This overlap of the ethical and the political and the conception of the self as embodied and socially constituted are...important theoretical resources for contemporary feminism” (McLaren, 2002, p. 15-16).

Jana Sawicki is another influential voice that is positive in its estimation of Foucault’s value for feminism. On the one hand, she notes the overlap between Foucault’s works and feminist concerns: “Foucault’s analyses of the dimensions of disciplinary power exercised outside the confines of the political realm of the modern liberal state overlapped with those of feminists already engaged in the

project of exploring the micropolitics of ‘private’ life” (Sawicki, 1996, p. 160). On the other, she argues that “his methods and cautionary tales have been useful and productive for feminist intellectuals struggling to combat dangerous trends within feminist theory and practice— feminist theorists who share neither his androcentrism nor his exclusive focus on subjection.” According to Sawicki Foucault’s most important contribution feminism is that ultimately he “asks us to reconsider the value of the emancipatory practices and theories that have been handed down to us through Western capitalist patriarchal traditions. Thus, his work fuels self-critical impulses within feminism that are indispensable” (Sawicki, 1996, p. 176-77).

Clearly Foucault’s work has had a powerful impact on feminist thinking: the range of responses attest to the many ways in which Foucault has offered provocation and inspiration to feminist engagement. In the final analysis, though it may only be just to read Foucault with his own admonition in mind: “My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous” (Foucault, 2000b, p. 256). In other words, just as a critical, locally rooted appropriation and use of Foucault is certainly valuable, a mindless, locally ill-informed imitation of Foucault is not only of questionable value but also potentially dangerous!

Check Your Progress:

In what ways do some of the defenders find his theories useful for examining power from a feminist perspective? List and explain.

7.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have focussed in some depth on Foucauldian thinking. A brief introduction to the life and works of Foucault provides the context for this study: it establishes Foucault’s importance as one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century. We then proceed to an engagement with Foucault’s delineation of the power-knowledge coupling. We have especially focussed here on how Foucault understands power to be a positive force, which, far from being antagonistic to knowledge/truth, actually both constitutes the latter, and is constituted by it. This is followed by a closer scrutiny of Foucault’s engagement with an ethical “aesthetic of existence.” Among other things, we have focussed here on how Foucault’s work on ethics becomes the basis also of a new politics for him based on a parrhesia- inspired critical function. Finally, we have provided a summary account of the range of disapproving as well approving feminist responses that Foucault’s work on power, truth, subjectivity and ethics has generated. After perusal, it is hoped that this Unit will have equipped you to critically engage and or adapt Foucauldian thinking when tackling not only theoretical questions of gender identity, but also practical problems of feminist politics.

7.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Discuss Foucault’s analytic of power.
- 2) Clarify how power and knowledge/truth are inextricable and mutually constitutive for Foucault.

- 3) Explain what Foucault means by ethics.
- 4) Elaborate how “care of the self” and parrhesia provide Foucault with the basis of a new politics. Is it different from the politics he suggested for the specific intellectual earlier?
- 5) What are some of the feminist criticisms of Foucault’s theories? Do you agree with these?
- 6) Discuss some of the ways in which Foucault has been appropriated by feminist scholars.
- 7) Do you think Foucault’s work would be useful in forging a meaningful gender politics in India? Explain.

7.9 REFERENCES

Aladjem, Terry K. (1996). *The Philosopher’s Prism: Foucault, Feminism, and Critique. Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault.* (Ed.) Susan J. Hekman. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Andersen, Perry (1983). *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism.* London: Verso.

Bartky, Sandra (1988). *Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power. Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance.* (Eds.) Irene Diamond & Lee Quinby. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Bordo, Susan (1989). *The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity. Gender, Body, Knowledge.* (Ed.) Alison Jaggar & Susan Bordo. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Butler, Judith (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* New York: Routledge.

Deveaux, Monique (1996). *Feminism and Empowerment: A Critical Reading of Foucault. Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault.* (Ed.) Susan J. Hekman. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Foucault, Michel (1979). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* (Trans.) Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage.

Foucault, Michel (1980a). *Body/Power. Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-77.* (Ed.) Colin Gordon. (Trans.) Colin Gordon et al. New York: Pantheon Books.

Foucault, Michel (1980b). *The Confession of the Flesh. Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-77.*(Ed.) Colin Gordon. (Trans.) Colin Gordon et al. New York: Pantheon Books.

Foucault, Michel (1980c). *Prison Talk. Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-77.* (Ed.) Colin Gordon. (Trans.) Colin Gordon et al. New York: Pantheon Books.

Foucault, Michel (1980d). *Truth and Power. Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-77.*(Ed.) Colin Gordon. (Trans.) Colin Gordon et al. New York: Pantheon Books.

Foucault, Michel (1980e). *Two Lectures. Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-77.* (Ed.) Colin Gordon. (Trans.) Colin Gordon et al. New York: Pantheon Books.

Foucault, Michel (1983). The Meaning and Evolution of the Word Parrhesia. Discourse and Truth: The Problematization of Parrhesia. First of six Lectures given by Michel Foucault. Berkeley. Retrieved, May 18, 2012, from <<http://foucault.info/documents/parrhesia/foucault.DT1.wordParrhesia.en.html>>.

Foucault, Michel (1986). The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality Volume 3. New York: Random House.

Foucault, Michel (1992). The Uses of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality, Volume 2. London: Penguin Books.

Foucault, Michel (1994a). So Is It Important to Think? Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-84, 3.(Ed.) James D. Faubion. (Trans.) Robert Hurley et al. London: Penguin Books.

Foucault, Michel (1994b). The Subject and Power. Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-84, 3. (Ed.) James D. Faubion. (Trans.) Robert Hurley et al. London: Penguin Books.

Foucault, Michel (1994c). Truth and Juridical Forms. Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-84, 3. (Ed.) James D. Faubion. (Trans.) Robert Hurley et al. London: Penguin Books.

Foucault, Michel (2000a). The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom. Ethics: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, 1. (Ed.) Paul Rabinow. Penguin Books.

Foucault, Michel (2000b). "On the Genealogy of Ethics." Ethics: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984,(1). (Ed.) Paul Rabinow. Penguin Books.

Foucault, Michel (2000c). Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity. Ethics: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, 1. (Ed.) Paul Rabinow. Penguin Books.

Foucault, Michel (2000d). Subjectivity and Truth. Ethics: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, 1. (Ed.) Paul Rabinow. Penguin Books.

Foucault, Michel (2000e). Technologies of the Self. Ethics: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, 1. (Ed.) Paul Rabinow. Penguin Books.

Foucault, Michel (2011). The Courage of the Truth: Lectures at the College de France 1983-84, (Ed.) Frederic Gros. (Trans.) Graham Burchell. Houndmills Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Fraser, Nancy (1996). Michel Foucault: A 'Young Conservative'? Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault. (Ed.) by Susan J. Hekman. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Gane, Michael (1986). (Ed.) Towards a Critique of Foucault. London and New York: Routledge.

Haber, Honi Fern (1996). Foucault Pumped: Body Politics and the Muscled Woman. Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault. (Ed.) Susan J. Hekman. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Hartsock, Nancy (1990). Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women? Feminism/Postmodernism. (Ed.) Linda J. Nicholson. New York and London: Routledge.

Hekman, Susan J. (1996). (Ed.) Editor's Introduction. Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Lauretis, Teresa de. (1987). Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Loyd, Moya (1996). *A Feminist Mapping of Foucauldian Politics. Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault.* (Ed.) Susan J. Hekman. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.

McLaren, Margaret A. (2002). *Feminism, Foucault and Embodied Subjectivity.* Albany, NY: SUNY.

McNeil, Maureen (1993). *Dancing with Foucault: Feminism and Power-Knowledge. Up against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions between Foucault and Feminism.* (Ed.) Caroline Ramazanoglu. London and New York: Routledge.

Miller, James (2000). *The Passion of Michel Foucault.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Moi, Toril (1985). *Power, Sex and Subjectivity: Feminist Reflections on Foucault.* Paragraph 5, 95-102.

Mudimbe, V. Y. (1992). *Saint Paul-Michel Foucault.* Transition 57, 122-27.

O'Grady, Helen (2004). "An Ethics of the Self." *Feminism and the Final Foucault.* (Ed.) Dianna Taylor & Karen Vintges. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Sawicki, Jana (1996). *Feminism, Foucault and 'Subjects' of Power and Freedom. Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault.* (Ed.) Susan J. Hekman. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Shor, Naomi (1989). *Dreaming Dissymmetry: Barthes, Foucault, and Sexual Difference. Coming to Terms.* (Ed.) Elizabeth Weed. New York and London: Routledge.

Simon, Jon (1996). *Foucault's Mother. Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault.* (Ed.) Susan J. Hekman. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Smart, Barry (1985). *Michel Foucault.* (Rev Ed.) London: Routledge.

7.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

Butler, Judith (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* New York: Routledge.

Diamond, Irene, & Lee Quinby (1988). (Eds.) *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance.* Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Hekman, Susan J. (1996) (Ed.) *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault.* Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.

McLaren, Margaret A. (2002) *Feminism, Foucault and Embodied Subjectivity.* Albany. NY: SUNY Press

Taylor, Dianna, & Karen Vintges (2004). (Eds.) *Feminism and the Final Foucault.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.