
UNIT 12 RE-MEMBERING

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12.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit, we looked at the links between postmodernism, gender and history through postmodern fiction. The present Unit would try to discuss the linkages between feminist fiction and postmodern theory. Postmodern feminist writers work to de-centre the traditional foundations of humanism and fixed truths as they are phallogocentric. They also challenge the normative masculine values that have so long posed as natural, essential, true and unified thereby suppressing, even denying, difference. Instead of the essentialism of conventional history that confines women and a host of other marginalized cultures to fixed social positions, these women writers validate difference, plurality and heterogeneity of experience as necessary components of identity and thus create a postmodern 'herstory' as it were. In this Unit we would see how Memory or the act of remembering acts as one of the chief devices used by feminist writers in their construction of a gendered identity. To illustrate this usage, we are going to look into representative texts of four postmodern women writers. In examining these works, we will see how the writers use the device of memory or remembering as a feminist strategy of revisionist representation of life and experiences. We will begin with Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (2005) in which Morrison uses the trope of memory to establish a link to the forgotten past of the Black community in America. Next we will discuss the extremely significant part memory plays in Maya Angelou's creation of self in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). Thirdly, we will analyze Leslie Marmon Silko's use of the act of remembering in *Storyteller* (1981) as a feminist stance to validate the experiences of the Native American life and culture. Finally, we turn to bell hooks' use of 'memory' (1996) from a feminist perspective to establish the experiences of growing up Black in a predominantly white culture.

12.2 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completing this unit, you will learn about:

- Links between fiction, feminism and postmodern theory;
- Memory as a feminist device;
- Specific literary strategies used by Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Leslie Marmon Silko and bell hooks in the given context; and
- The use of ‘memory’ in the construction of postmodern gendered identities.

12.3 FICTION, FEMINISM AND POSTMODERN THEORY

In her widely anthologized essay, “Postmodern Blackness” (1990), bell hooks interrogates the very discourses of postmodernism set up to describe the current theories and the critical histories that the various facets of the postmodern, post colonial cultures are engaged with constructing. She writes: “The contemporary discourse which talks the most about heterogeneity, the decentered subject, declaring breakthroughs that allow recognition of otherness, still directs its critical voice primarily to a specialized audience, one that shares a common language rooted in the very master narratives it claims to challenge. If radical postmodernist thinking is to have a transformative impact then a critical break with the notion of “authority” as “mastery over” must not simply be a rhetorical device, it must be reflected in habits of being, including styles of writing as well as chosen subject matter” (hooks, 1990). In the previous blocks of this course, we have already learnt how postmodern feminism uses a subversive style of talking about exclusionary systems and their structures of power as well as to interrogate the misogyny at the heart of subject formation and the production of meaning (Tung, 2009, p.660). Working to dismantle unified, culturally constructed identities that marginalize, indeed, banish difference as ‘abnormal’, thus imprisoning and de-limiting subjectivities, postmodern feminist writers open up novel ways of asserting agency by validating difference thus affirming plurality of identities and a diverse variety of experiences.

Postmodern multicultural women writers challenge the hegemony of the individuated monologic identity of the self as put forth by mainstream male writers. They insist, rather, as Hernandez states, “that the self exists only in a complex web of relationships to other people and other life forms, all of which have a part in the construction of the [individual] identity. They replace egocentric monologue with a polyphonic, interactive autobiographical discourse, the written equivalent of a chorus of voices from the past, present, and future that offer a very different understanding of history”(Hernandez, 1994, p.40) than the conventional mainstream writings. According to Hernandez, instead of the orderly linear or sequential progression manifested in traditional mainstream writing, these writings by postmodern women “tend to be non-linear and episodic, with voices from different times sharing in the narration of a collective life history that moves synchronically through different related narrators and diachronically through different historical periods” (Hernandez, 1994, p.41). Avoiding the chronological, egocentric model of a narrative, the postmodern fiction by feminist writers substitutes in its place “a discontinuous,

polyphonic narrative that blurs the boundaries between self and other, past and present, history and fiction” (Hernandez, 1994, p.45). One of the chief devices employed by the postmodern feminist writers for creating this polyphonic, discontinuous narrative, as this unit would discuss, is memory and the act of remembrance.

12.4 MEMORY AS A FEMINIST DEVICE

To remember is defined as “to bring to mind” or “think of again;” “to be mindful of,” or “to recollect.” The act of remembering or recollecting thus suggests an assembling, a connecting, a bringing together of memories in relation to one another “in order to move forward and transform disabling fictions to enabling fictions, altering our relation to the present and future” (Greene, 1991, p.297). This definition of re-membering, that succinctly foregrounds the feminist use of memory as a revisionist stance, charts the ways the past can be controlled through memories. By privileging certain stories and marginalizing others in the process of re-telling or story-telling, memories continually reshape, reinterpret, and reinvent the past. A loss of memory thus entails the loss of the ability to experience, as Betty Friedan says in her famous treatise *The Feminine Mystique*, “the dimensions of both past and future” (Friedan, 1962, p.312). Feminist scholarship, through its continual consciousness raising and projects for the recovery of women’s lost contributions, appropriates the act of re-membering as a political action and actively use this device of memory thus bringing to mind repressed areas of one’s experience and self. Feminism, thus, says Greene, “is a re- membering, a re-assembling of our lost past and lost parts of ourselves. We search for our mother’s gardens, in Alice Walker’s term; we search for our mothers—and this search ... figures prominently in contemporary women’s fiction” (Greene, 1991, p.300). In her essay *Notes on the ‘Post-Colonial’* (1992), Ella Shohat comments on the importance of memory not only for women but also for cultural survival as the retrieval and re-inscription of a fragmented past through fragmented sets of narrated memories and experiences becomes a crucial contemporary site for forging a resistant collective identity because it is impossible to “forge a collective resistance without inscribing a communal past” (Shohat, 1992, p. 109).

Feminist postmodern narrative thus re-collects, re-members, repeats in the process of creating a metafiction, that aspires to “a narrative re-description of reality,” to a “new story” that interrogates the ways, as Patricia Waugh says, of “the meanings and values of [the] world have been constructed and how, therefore, they can be challenged or changed” (Waugh cited in Greene, 1991, p.293). Inherently unsettling and, by definition, a challenge to established assumptions, postmodern feminist fiction is thus a powerful tool of feminist critique that is focused on women’s efforts to liberate themselves from the confining and repressive structures of the past.

Feminist narrative fiction thus works not only to reconstruct the erased female identity but also to retrieve the lost ethnic memory, to acknowledge the silenced culture’s differences, and to name the unspeakable presence of the ‘Other Woman’, to borrow Hsin-ya Huang’s term, so as to present a counter hegemonic discourse to the dominant culture and its inscription of history with an “otherness” that has its sources in silenced and/or forgotten ethnic history and culture (Huang, 2002, p. 153). Through their stories of the Other Woman and ‘othered’ cultures and experiences, the postmodern feminist writers like

Morrison, Angelou, Silko, and hooks, who are discussed later in this unit, go beyond the dominant sexual and racial confines, and re-define the established tradition. These stories become the site of a struggle from which the ethnic female voice originates through what Toni Morrison has called a ‘rememory’ - the conscious act of remembering and validating the specific memory of traumatic historical events that have been ‘disremembered’ or consciously forgotten and unacknowledged. Women, as bearers of culture, become the speaking subjects who “rememory” re- member, connecting the repressed ethnic cultural past with the present. These writers become story-tellers who re-member and re-deem the repressed ethnic past through their ‘new stories’ that commemorate and transmit the cultural past interweaving the personal with mythological, historical, and tribal memories thus transforming the culture for generations.

Check Your Progress:

- i) Why do you think memory plays such an important role in the works of some women writers? Can you think of a work by an Indian woman writer or a film with women characters where the same is true? Explain some of the links that you can make.

- ii) What does the term ‘rememory’ refer to? Explain in your own words in the space provided below.

12.4.1 Toni Morrison: *Beloved*

Toni Morrison (1931), in her Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Beloved* (1987; 2005), writes, as she says, ‘to repossess, rename, re-own,’ (Mackay, 1988, p.46) the historical facts about the construction of Black subjectivity in a need to know and accept ancestral heritage which will throw light on the forgotten and discredited ‘interior lives’ of the slaves. In *Beloved*, Morrison makes her protagonist Sethe the agent of the novel’s theory of memory and repression that give rise to the dialectics between ‘disremember’ and ‘rememory’ in which the effort to forget is constantly threatened by memory desperate to stay alive. The un-named murdered daughter *Beloved*, as a ghost returned from the unforgettable past, becomes a symbolic resurrection of the memory of the innumerable forgotten people— the remembering of the lost “sixty million” to whom Morrison dedicates her revisionist novel. Through her ‘highly vocal ghosts’ Morrison tries to ‘render enslavement as a personal experience’ in her readers; to relate this history to contemporary issues about freedom, responsibility, and woman’s “place” (Morrison, 2005, p. x-xiii). “Refusing to accept existing traditional history written by the whites as absolute and unquestionable,” Sunanda Pal comments, “Morrison questions the paradigms on which historical ‘facts’ were constructed...She writes into Black history those painful stories which have been bypassed by the controllers of history” (Pal, 1994, p. 2439). In *Beloved* Morrison depicts memory and narrative— remembering and telling— as means of reconstruction and liberation of the black community making the novel, “a political text, a work that empowers the disenfranchised and gives speech to the silenced” (Greene, 1991, p.321). An African American woman novelist trying

to re-construct her culture's denied and destroyed historic past, Toni Morrison tries to re-imagine slavery from a black female point of view through the act of remembering in *Beloved* to constitute a collective symbolic reauthorization of the voice of the female slave, that is part of the recuperation of "herstory" ongoing in the post-1960s black women's literary 'renaissance' (Rody, 1995, p.100).

12.4.2 Maya Angelou: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969), the first volume of the six-volume autobiography by Maya Angelou that includes *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin' and Swingin'* and *Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), and *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002), expresses the quest for independence, personal dignity, and self-definition of a Black woman growing up in a white, racist America. Angelou uses both poetry and memory to explore issues like identity, rape, racism, class, gender, and the importance of literacy in her life writing thus acknowledging the influence of the slave narratives in her use of the autobiographic mode in poetry. Writing in non-traditional ways about women's lives in a male dominated society in her autobiographies, Angelou tried to write in a stance that made the personal political. She tried to chronicle the emergence of the black female subject by narrating the personal story of one Southern Black girl's experiences of life and linking it to the collective experience of a community. A central motif throughout her poetry and life writing, the metaphor of the caged bird struggling to escape, an image inspired by Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, *Sympathy* (1899), not only signifies Angelou's own entrapment but also the repression suffered by all African Americans due to racist oppression; yet it is also a metaphor for the freedom the interned bird seeks through her singing. African-American oral traditions, like slave and work songs, can also be traced in her poems especially in her use of personal narrative and emphasis on individual responses to hardship, oppression and loss. Angelou's narrative in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, derives from the unvoiced and silenced experiences of the Black community, its sufferings and ultimate survival and thus transmutes the past through the device of memory to recreate a forgotten reality that showcases the development of the Black female subjecthood in a repressive system.

12.4.3 Leslie Marmon Silko: *Storyteller*

Storyteller (1981), a communal autobiography or 'talk-story' by the Native American Laguna writer Leslie Marmon Silko (1948) brings to the fore the cultural domination of the Euro-American majority that threatens the survival of the Native American people and their stories within white racist interpretive structures in which these stories remain meaningless, unrepresented or unheard. The familial and collective transmission and perpetuation of stories for Silko serve as vital cultural forces necessary not merely for the survival of the indigenous culture and traditions of the Native American people, but for the entire earth and its habitants as well. In *Storyteller*, as Cynthia Carsten observes, Silko challenges 'the monologic character and the authoritative voice of Euro-American autobiography' and rejects 'the dominant culture's regard for the autonomous self and the core values associated with individualism... [and] situates her individuality in a community context, drawing heavily on Laguna Pueblo oral tradition and history, shared family memories and photographs, as

well as photographs of the Pueblo landscape... [She] strategically positions family photos and remembrances, original works of fiction and poetry, and traditional Native stories in such a way that they “speak” to one another” (Carsten, 2006, p.105). In *Storyteller*, Silko uses memory or the stance of remembering through storytelling so as to perpetuate and validate the lost and forgotten oral tradition of storytelling in her own memory; her own retellings, told from a Native American interpretive perspective, incorporate the narrative voices of different generations of storytellers so as to tell “the whole story/ the long story of the people” (Silko, 1981, p.7) that have been marginalized, excluded or silenced. Silko’s own, personal story emerges through this act of collective storytelling. Validating the act of remembering through the traditional Native American multi-generational narration of stories, Silko says in an Interview with Kim Barnes, storytelling is “a whole way of being...a whole way of seeing your-self, the people around you, your life, the place of your life in the bigger context, not just in terms of nature and location, but in terms of what has gone on before, what’s happened to other people.”—the use of ‘memory, imagination, and storytelling voice’ gives rise to a self that is infinitely fluid, endlessly subject to change, for “every time a story is told,” Silko comments in the same interview, “each telling is a new and unique story” (Barnes cited in Hernandez, 1994, p.45). Challenging the Euro-American views of reality, objectivity, empirical truth and the sovereignty of the written word Silko interweaves the mythic and the mundane in her Laguna stories that reflect on contemporary life. By framing collective cultural memory in contemporary literary forms, and placing herself in an ancestral line of storytellers as the inheritor of a dynamic, dialogic process of oral tradition of myth and history, as Carsten points out, Silko manages to bind individual and tribal experience, thus forcing her readers to participate in a worldview different from their own (Carsten, 2006, p.105).

12.4.4 bell hooks: *Bone Black*

Situating herself in the tradition of writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange and Toni Cade Bambara who are “concerned with identifying the pain of black women and with designing creative maps for healing”, bell hooks, “openly and honestly draws upon her own life to bear witness to the joys and pains of being a black woman” (Gamble, 1993, p. 12). Bell hooks’ *Bone Black Memories of Girlhood* (1996) is significant in the traditions of African American women’s autobiography not only as a record of one black woman’s girlhood but also as a validation of the collective black female experience. Hooks’ memory of growing up as a colored girl in a racist culture serves as a witness to the repression experienced by the marginalized ‘Others’ in a normative social structure. Consisting of a series of short sketches, the narrative of *Bone Black* uses a mixture of dreams, fantasies, and experiences, through which hooks creates an autobiography that subtly blends truth and myth through the device of memory and the act of remembering. Hooks politically analyses her personal life—her account of experiences and feelings as a black girl growing up in a traditional, Southern, working-class family of America, to give witness to a variety of social ills like sexism, classism and racism. *Bone Black*, thus, is not merely an account of hooks’ personal life, but a probing analysis of black girlhood (Patton, 1999, p.165). Through *Bone Black* hooks wanted not only to add substance to the inadequate documentation of the lives of black girls but also to rectify any inaccurate generalized cultural assumptions about the raising

of black girls based upon the conditions of white girlhood. hooks “offers her story, not to stand as the representative black girlhood-because, as she points out, black girls’ experiences, like black women’s, are diverse, varying according to class and other factors-but rather to begin the crucial work of documenting some of those experiences...[and it] emphasizes a desire to record and share black culture, as it was produced and experienced in her Southern community” (Shockley, 1997, p.552). Bone Black traces hooks’ development from a young girl to a woman who wears black as for hooks ‘black is a woman’s color’, and “[i]n her dreams all wonderful things denied are the color black” observes Venetria K. Patton, her reviewer. In her effort to make a world for herself within the darkness hooks is determined to speak her mind and come to terms with the world around her. According to Patton, her memoirs, written from her personal experiences and realisations as a black woman, record her travels to self-discovery, her means of making meaning thus extending the personal to the realm of cultural studies (Patton, 1999, p.165).

Activity:

Read any work not discussed in this Unit by any of the four writers mentioned above. Try to analyze the role of memory as a feminist device in this work. List some important points here.

12.5 LET US SUM UP

From the above discussion it is clear how memory or the act of remembering can be used as a potent tool in the construction of a gendered identity that acknowledges and accommodates difference and thus embraces a pluralist world view. Postmodern feminist women writers like Morrison, Angelou, Silko and hooks, re-member, or literally re-connect, and bring within the discourse, the silenced and marginalized pasts that have been ‘disremembered’ or excluded from essentialist mainstream histories to create new ‘herstories.’ These new stories on one hand dismantle the fixed truths and the associated constructs of a monologic, unified homogeneity in a normative world view and on the other, these stories redefine tradition to posit a diverse, interconnected, multi-voiced, and thus fluid continuum that takes into account both the forgotten past and the present to recreate a new future. Morrison uses the concept of ‘re-memory’ in *Beloved* to validate the unheard past of the African Americans writhing under the oppression of slavery. Silko in *Storyteller* re-connects with her Laguna past through the ‘talk-stories’ tapping into the forgotten wisdom of a lost oral tradition thus validating the interconnected world view of the Native Americans. Angelou in her autobiography tries to recreate the processes of black subject formation through the experiences of a black woman growing up in a racist, color segregated culture and hooks connects her own experiences of growing up black in a repressive culture to the larger social problems related to class, gender and race. All of these writers thus use memory and the act of re-remembering to challenge the exclusionary structures of thought and posit an interconnected, inclusive perspective that gives voice to the unvoiced.

12.6 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Explain the term ‘feminist fiction’? Discuss the linkages between feminist fiction and postmodern theory.
- 2) Do you agree that memory or the act of remembering is one of the chief devices used by feminist writers in their construction of a gendered identity? Discuss.
- 3) What is re-memory? How does Morrison use this concept of re-memory in *Beloved* to validate the unheard past of the African Americans writhing under the oppression of slavery?
- 4) What role does memory play in Angelou’s creation of self in *I know why the caged bird sings*? Discuss.
- 5) In what ways does Silko use the act of remembering in *Storyteller*? Discuss the implications of this stance for Silko and her readers.
- 6) “Black is a woman’s color,” says bell hooks. Discuss how she corroborates this statement by using ‘memory’ from a feminist perspective?

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