
UNIT 3 SUB-VERSE

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Structure

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

As discussed in the previous unit, postmodernist literature is a complex and arguably undefined expanse of literary genres, styles and periods. In the first two units of this block, we have examined questions of gender in the context of postmodern fiction and drama. In this unit, we will distinguish between postmodern and modern poetry. We will look then discuss the work of a few postmodern poets by identifying gender-related themes in their poems. A theme in which gender is implicit is the theme of love, and a discernible feature of postmodernist poetry is the uninhibited exploration of erotic love as a trope, which may be distinguished from the bleaker and more austere treatment of love in modernism. A few instances of postmodernist love poetry are cited in this unit. The poets discussed here come from different generations, geographical locations and literary traditions, and we will emphasize understandings of gender embedded in their poetry. We will focus on the interrelations between gender, sexuality, race and power, and how the genre of poetry can be used to subvert the hegemony of power from a gendered perspective. We will read about the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, the British-Pakistani poet Imtiaz Dharker, and the American poets Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker and Audre Lorde. You are encouraged to read the verse in the original and analyse the issues discussed here in the context of the poems.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, you will be able to:

- Locate postmodern poetry within the larger context of postmodernism;
- Identify distinct traits of postmodern poetry;
- Gain familiarity with the work of a few postmodern poets across cultural contexts;
- Discuss the theme of love and sexuality in the poems discussed; and
- Explore the gender questions represented in the given poems.

3.3 BACKGROUND: POSTMODERN POETRY

Postmodernism is generally understood to have come into its own during and after the 1940s, but the genesis of postmodernist poetry as a distinctive literary genre can be traced to the writings of poets such as W. H. Auden published in the mid to late 1930s. In terms of distinguishing postmodernist poetry from its immediate predecessor, it may be noted that modernist poetry and postmodernist poetry share many characteristics, such as fragmentariness and the exploration of individual subjectivity and states of consciousness, but thematically they diverge in many respects as well. This, however, depends on individual poets and is not reflective of any general principle. Jerome Mazzaro (1980) writes:

Without the technical language of the structuralists, the formulation of the essential differences between ‘modernism’ and ‘postmodernism’ becomes: in conceiving of language as a fall from unity, modernism seeks to restore the original state often by proposing silence or the destruction of language; postmodernism accepts the division and uses language and self-definition - much as Descartes interpreted thinking - as the basis of identity. Modernism tends, as a consequence, to be more mystical in the traditional senses of that word whereas postmodernism, for all its seeming mysticism, is irrevocably worldly and social. Rather than T. S. Eliot’s belief that poetry ‘is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality’, postmodernists propose the opposite.

(Mazzaro, 1980, p. viii)

Postmodernism, therefore, signals not only the logical extension of modernist concerns beyond the realm of the mystical but also a turn inwards. Instead of transcending inner preoccupations, postmodernism accepts the inescapability of personal thoughts, passions and emotions and uses these as the object of poetic expression. Inheriting modernism’s tendency towards disruptiveness, postmodernist poetry is sometimes formally fragmentary and thematically unstable.

The importance of experimentation and play in the language of postmodern poetry cannot be overstated. Postmodern poetry, through its diffuse tropes, plurality and diversity of concerns, is the site of the articulation of some of the most 'subversive' understandings of gender. It is through postmodern poetry that many of the (then) new feminist re-conceptualizations of gender emerged. This unit presents a cross-section of seminal feminist poets and their works. It is in this regard that verse and 'subversion' conflate and come together - poetry becomes the means of mounting a challenge to the values, conceptions and definitions imposed by the established social order. Language is the means by which new understandings of the gendered self and society are put forward. Literature and poetry have always played a subversive role in the history of human thought, but postmodern poetry is of special significance to the feminist movement and to the progressive struggle for the recognition of gender and sexuality issues in the mainstream of society.

Let us now look at some examples of postmodern poetry, beginning with the famous Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda.

3.4 PABLO NERUDA

Pablo Neruda (1904-1973) was a Chilean poet who wrote intensely political as well as deeply personal and erotic poetry. He was a committed Communist and an active member of his political party in Chile. He served in many government positions and was even forced into exile for a few years when Communism was outlawed in 1948 by a Conservative Chilean president. While our focus here will be on his erotic poetry in order to uncover the relationship between gender and the erotic, it is necessary to introduce Neruda foremost as a political poet and to acknowledge the strong political underpinnings of his poetry, particularly in works such as *Canto General* (1950) and *Spain in the Heart* (1938). He wrote in Spanish.

His most well-known collection of love poetry is *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* (1924). In Neruda's poetry, the dominant themes are love and desire. Lovers are often separated and sundered by destiny and they feel a great longing for each other accentuated by absence. Frustrated desire turns to melancholy and longing is steeped in overwhelming sadness. The themes of longing, separation and absence come together in 'A Song of Despair'. This poem captures the despairing melancholy of the poetic self, weaving love and desolation together to depict the sorrow of departure and the separation of lovers.

The woman of his dreams, the figure of the beloved, has been his redemption. In her, and in their passion, everything else is absorbed. Their togetherness has consumed all his cares, the passage of time and the exigencies of the world:

In you the wars and the flights accumulated.
From you the wings of the song birds rose.

You swallowed everything, like distance.
Like the sea, like time. In you everything sank!

(Neruda, 1924a)

The passion of togetherness consumes everything, but separation makes reality painful and unbearable. The poet experiences absence as a painful prelude to a future marked by thirst, hunger and desolation. The beloved will be no more and his love will become a ruin, a deserted “cemetery” marred by the absence of hope. Separation is described as a ritual of death, where images of ruin - debris, cemeteries and tombs - predominate. Being separated from his beloved is like slipping into decay.

Gender here operates at many levels. Sexual passion and union with the beloved are emphasized, and a sense that their togetherness is all-consuming and all-encompassing is evoked by the yoking together of images of consummation. The beloved is the “fruit” that redeems the poet’s “thirst and hunger”; theirs are the “bitten mouth”, the “kissed limbs”, “hungering teeth” and “entwined bodies”, emblems of passionate love and consummation. In “Drunk As Drunk”, the lovers are located in an idyllic imagined space called the “Fortunate Isles” where sensuousness is uninhibited and unhindered. Sensuousness and naked passion characterize his encounters with his lover. The woman’s body represents sensuous energy, and they are entwined in physical oneness: “Your wet body wedged/ Between my wet body and the strake/ Of our boat that is made of flowers...” (Neruda, 1918).

The lover’s feminine sensuousness is matched by the enigma that is her nature. She is almost hard to capture, very elusive. When she is away, the poetic voice becomes desperately forlorn and he longs to be near her again. She eludes corporeality, any bodily definition and form. She *is* an absence. The poet’s longing in “Don’t Go Far Off” (Neruda 1959a) is acute, and we sense that her retreating presence causes him to anguish over his feelings of abandonment (“the smoke that roams looking for a home will drift/ into me, choking my lost heart”) (Neruda 1959a) Her momentary absence translates into a kind of permanent loss which drives the poet to desperation and drives him to wander around in search of her:

Don’t leave me for a second, my dearest,
because in that moment you’ll have gone so far
I’ll wander mazily over all the earth, asking,
Will you come back?
Will you leave me here, dying?
(Neruda 1959a)

The gendered absence represents an extreme state of emotions - desperation and longing - but the poet's love is also changeable, variant and prone to vacillation. The woman, his lover, is as real and subject to the changing vicissitudes of love as she is formless and sublime. In "I Do Not Love You Except Because I Love You" (Neruda, 1959b), he tells his beloved that her absence causes his love to wither away and diminish. He feels like he may not be able to guarantee his love for her: "I do not love you except because I love you;/ I go from loving to not loving you,/ From waiting to not waiting for you/ My heart moves from cold to fire" (Neruda, 1959b). His "changing love" changes him and changes how the beloved appears to him. He is just human, he wants to tell her, and his variable nature is not beyond reproach.

Love isn't beyond reproach either. Love can be both a wonderful experience as well as a difficult one. Love infuses the world with unimaginable beauty and sublimity but it also brings the lovers many painful situations and realizations that they must surely confront ("Love"):

What's wrong with you, with us,
 what's happening to us?
 Ah our love is a harsh cord
 that binds us wounding us
 and if we want
 to leave our wound,
 to separate,
 it makes a new knot for us and condemns us
 to drain our blood and burn together.

(Neruda 1959c)

Sometimes the lover also appears to him quite unexceptional, just another woman in a string of women he has known. There is nothing special about her and her quotidian nature contradicts all the mysterious sublimity attributed to her. At other times, his love for her is a kind of secret, something hidden and clandestine. For example, in "Sonnet XVII", he writes, "I love you as certain dark things are to be loved,/ in secret, between the shadow and the soul" (Neruda, 1959d).

Therefore, we can say that Neruda's construction of the figure of the woman as lover has two identifiable tendencies, one towards the sublime and mysterious and the other towards earthy simplicity. The female lover of "Morning" (Sonnet XXVII) is a woman who represents earthy simplicity and natural beauty: "Naked you are simple as one of your hands;/ Smooth, earthy, small, transparent, round./ You've moon-lines, apple pathways/ Naked you are slender as a naked grain of wheat." (Neruda 1959e) She is compared to natural phenomena and earthy metaphors are used to describe her. In the same poem itself, however, she transforms into a sublime creature, just like the larger-than-life female lover of "Sonnet XXXIV (You are the

daughter of the sea)”. In the latter poem, the figure of the woman is infused with substantial regenerative and almost-divine power: “Your eyes go out toward the water, and the waves rise;/ your hands go out to the earth and the seeds swell;/ you know the deep essence of water and the earth,/ conjoined in you like a formula for clay” (Neruda, 1959f).

Concluding this section, it would be interesting to briefly take a look at Neruda’s construction of the lover in one of his best known poems, “Tonight I Can Write” (Neruda, 1924b). The lover is both physically and metaphorically remembered. She is remembered for her embraces, her kisses, her love and passion, and yet is remembered as a symbolic absence:

Tonight I can write the saddest lines.

To think that I do not have her. To feel that I have lost her.

To hear the immense night, still more immense without her.

And the verse falls to the soul like dew to the pasture.

(Neruda, 1924b)

We have seen how the instability of the notion of woman, her constant wavering between presence and absence makes Neruda’s verse characteristically postmodern. In the next section, let us examine the work of an equally well-known woman poet, Sylvia Plath.

Check Your Progress:

i) *What are the different ways in which Neruda describes the experience of love?*

ii) *How is the female beloved represented by this poet? Comment on the representation.*

3.5 SYLVIA PLATH

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) was an American poet best known for her genre of confessional poetry, her real-life and literary preoccupation with ideas of life and death, her enormous output and prodigious writing. Her writing has been described by Al Alvarez as the poetic rendering of everyday domestic images and experiences, infused with meaning and transformed. She is credited with developing the “domestic surreal” - the infusion of strangeness and unpredictability in images of domestic life (Mazzenti cited in Kinsey-Clinton, 1997, p. 1). An interesting passage from one of Plath’s journals throws light on her understanding of gender-relations and her own personal convictions: “I must find a strong potential powerful mate who can counter my vibrant dynamic self: sexual and intellectual, and while comradely, I must admire him: respect and admiration must equate with the object of my love (that is where the remnants of paternal, godlike qualities come in)” (Plath, 1982, p. 73). She sees relationships as necessarily interactive and mutually reinforcing, premised on mutual love and admiration.

Let us look at two of her poems from *The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath* (1981) and briefly survey how gender is deployed in these poems. “Two Sisters of Persephone” portrays, as indicated in the title, two sisters, one very bookish and mathematical, and the other vibrant and full of life. One is placed inside the house, representing dank domesticity, immersed in mathematical equations and sedate study, and the other lies outside the house, ostensibly luxuriating in the sun - one “within” and the other “without”. The first is squint-eyed and “rat-shrewd”, a creature of the dark interiors of the house, enwrapped in seclusion. The other is a creature of the “green altar”, the “sun’s bride”. The first sister’s life concludes in what is portrayed as a bitter end, she remains a virgin till death, “worm-husbanded”. The second is full of *joie de vivre*, or the joy of life, suffused with regenerative energy, “quick with seed”. The polar opposites created in the poem perhaps reflect the anxieties of the gendered woman, who is pushed towards one or the other pole. The anxieties are internalized within the same person, who becomes anxious upon finding in herself aspects of both, and the black-and-white resolution of the poem illuminates society’s perceptions and expectations.

The second poem that we can look at is “Strumpet Song”. The figure of the woman here is that most reviled of women, the strumpet or prostitute. The dark atmosphere created by the poem captures the gloom and deathliness that surrounds the weather-beaten and time-worn prostitute. Her solitary pain and suffering come through most poignantly as she looks into the eyes of the poet-persona. Stranded and betrayed by the men who have carelessly thrust her aside, she is a casualty of other people’s violent desires. They have desecrated her face and her body bears marks of the violent passion

inflicted on her time and again, over years of unremitting pain. The figure of the prostitute represents the pariah of society, subject to its sexual wants, desires and cravings, but disregarded; she is tired and dejected. The poet inquires if there is anyone who can offer her love, to cover the hidden pain in her “rank grimace”. These two poems offer us a brief glimpse of Plath’s conceptualization of gender in her poems.

Check Your Progress:

On the basis of your reading of Sylvia Plath’s poems, describe the three kinds of women depicted in the poems discussed in this section.

3.6 ADRIENNE RICH

Adrienne Rich (born 1929) is an American writer, poet and academic. She published several volumes of poetry in the early part of her career and became actively involved at an early stage in political activities, especially women’s rights movements and the anti-Vietnam War movement. Her later career, after the death of her husband, is distinguished by her self-identification and “coming out” as a lesbian and the exploration of that identity. She has written extensively on the politics of sexuality and on motherhood, which we will refer to later in this section. We will first look at two of her poems to try and understand the construction and examination of gender in her poetry.

“Snapshots of a Daughter-In-Law” (1963) weaves through the troubles and conflicts of domestic life. It captures the self-destructive tendencies wrought upon the mind of the woman compelled to submit to the confines of her domestic existence and succumb to her chores, which in themselves appear simple and innocuous but assume deadly significance when they erase the vitality of the confined woman. The simple chores of everyday life - cooking,

ironing, cleaning, washing - become rituals of boredom and pain, and she plays with thoughts of self-destruction - the burning of the hand, the scalding of her skin. Women appear in the poem in conflict with one another. The subject of the poem attempts to salvage her past, her poise, her sense of dignity and expectations of beauty. In fact, her past is an important marker of her identity, especially when seen in the context of her changing and deteriorating present:

Your mind now, moldering like wedding-cake,
 heavy with useless experience, rich
 with suspicion, rumor, fantasy,
 crumbling to pieces under the knife-edge
 of mere fact. In the prime of your life.

(Rich, 1963)

The most significant aspect of this change is that she is dissatisfied with herself because of her lack of personal growth. She feels trapped: "Poised, trembling and unsatisfied, before/ an unlocked door, that cage of cages..." (Rich, 1963). The reader is told, in conclusion, that the dominance of patriarchy is such that it perpetuates itself through subtle forms of control which are difficult to define and even more difficult to shake off. The following stanza expresses some of these anxieties, articulated by modern feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Harriet Taylor Mill long before Rich, but captured so eloquently here:

Time is male
 and in his cups drinks to the fair.
 Bemused by gallantry, we hear
 our mediocrities over-praised,
 indolence read as abnegation,
 slattern thought styled intuition,
 every lapse forgiven, our crime
 only to cast too bold a shadow
 or smash the mold straight off.
 For that, solitary confinement,
 tear gas, attrition shelling.
 Few applicants for that honor.

(Rich, 1963)

Let us consider another poem by Rich. In "My Mouth Hovers Across Your Breasts" (1977), she discovers the beauty and comfort of intimacy shared with another woman. She reconfigures the trope of the erotic to bring

together and celebrate the love and desire shared between women. Here, another constraint of gender relations (the constraint of compulsory heterosexuality) is revoked, and she explores the potential of the erotic to capture the transcendent love that goes beyond the prescribed permutations of desire in society. However, the poem could also be read in a heterosexual frame, with a male poet-persona instead of an assumed female poet-persona, and this is indeed an example of the subtlety of Rich's poetry. The sexual love depicted in the poem could maneuver between homosexual and heterosexual love, without a clear-cut division separating the two. This is indicative of the way postmodernism has eroded traditional lines of sexuality, allowing for multiplicity and profusion.

Activity:

Read the poem "Snapshots of a Daughter-In-Law" and respond to the following:

i) Discuss Rich's treatment of domesticity.

ii) Identify postmodern elements of this poem.

3.7 ALICE WALKER

Alice Walker (born 1944) is an African-American author and poet. The publication of her third novel, *The Color Purple* (1982) was a significant event in African-American fiction and it brought her a lot of critical acclaim. She was born in Georgia and her parents were farmers. *The Colour Purple* is a haunting book that explores the troubled lives of two African-American sisters separated at an early age by a vindictive father. One of the sisters is married off to a cruel and violent man by their apathetic father, while the other goes along with a missionary couple to work in Africa. The experiences of the sister who stays behind and is confined to her punishing life as a subservient wife in the violent home of Mister are recorded in epistolary form (through letters) and we are taken through her journey of self-discovery, friendship, self-expression and final reconciliation. Her work also explores the multiple forms of love embedded in homosexual and heterosexual desire.

Besides writing fiction, Alice Walker has also published several collections of verse. Here, we will look at two of Walker's poems, "Desire" and "She".

"Desire" (2011) addresses the source of the poet's desire to live, to be, to exist and to love. Desire is unpredictable and it takes her anywhere. Its path is not straight and narrow, and she is willing to plunge into any adventure that it guides her to. She is curious about life and wishes to dip into every experience, no matter how grand or small. She is open to life and all its possibilities. Desire is subtle and multiform. It can be small and insignificant, or it can be large and overpowering. Her memories, her past, her experiences all contribute to who she is. The pain of the past is swept away to make room for, and augur, new desire. The seeming impossibility of devotion, of being devoted to something or someone, disappears. Desire transforms into devotion. The concluding lines of the poem are: "And that is how I've survived:/ how the hole/ I carefully tended/ in the garden of my heart/ grew a heart/ to fill it" (Walker, 2011). Desire signifies her ability to absorb her triumphs and tribulations, her love and sorrow, her joy and sadness and to make her a living and loving human being, capable of growth, maturity and beautiful expression.

"She" (2009) is a poem dedicated to her friend, Gloria Steinem. We will look at the poem here to explore notions of friendship, companionship and sisterhood as typified by Steinem's dynamic "womanhood". Walker called her philosophical perspective a "womanist" perspective, emerging from the field of "cultural feminism" (Flynn, 2002, p. 3). The "she" in the poem appears to the reader as an extremely dynamic, versatile, erudite and compassionate person - everything that contributes to the beauty of the woman she is. She intimately knows the flowers of spring; she tells "the

most funny & complicated joke(s)” (Walker, 2009); she loves dancing, loves food, and she knows the best restaurants and the best places to shop; she is intelligent and incisive, she speaks her mind, she is forthright and knowledgeable; she is socially-committed and she motivates others to honour their commitments; she is bright and encouraging, she boosts the self-confidence and self-respect of those around her; she is a loyal friend who will abide by you in the best and worst of times, she will be with you in your moment of joy, and see you through your trials and tribulations. She is courageous, empathetic and vigorous. She has a social vision: “She is the one who makes/ activism/ the most compelling/ because she is the one/ who is irresistible/ her own self” (Walker, 2009).

Walker’s “womanist” point of view celebrates the beauty and the spirit of womanhood, which encompasses all the ideals and qualities described in the above poem. Her activist woman-persona, while sharp, aggressive and vigorous, is also a spontaneous, loving, kind and compassionate person. This is a celebration of the diversity inherent in human life and the nurturing spirit of a loving community.

Check Your Progress:

What kind of personality does Walker celebrate in the poem “She”?

3.8 AUDRE LORDE

Audre Lorde (1934-1992) was an American poet and writer born in New York to Caribbean parents from Grenada. She grew up relatively poor and documented her early life brilliantly in a novel called *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1983). There, she describes growing up with her strict and sometimes repressive but extremely hardworking parents, and her two sisters,

in a racially-segregated society where blacks were oppressed and discriminated against in most public and private institutions. It charts her early pain, her growing self-awareness and outspokenness, her involvement in social issues, and evolution from girlhood to womanhood. She discusses her sexual awakening and the trajectory of her romantic encounters to chart her growing self-confidence as a black lesbian woman. The novel captures her struggles and triumphs, her happiness and pain in developing relationships with several other women. She explores the contours of the community of gay and lesbian women in Greenwich Village in New York and writes about its many comforts and pitfalls.

In *Zami* as well as in her poetry, Lorde's overarching preoccupation with identity co-opts many different aspects of identity itself - sexuality, race, parenthood and love. These different aspects of her identity interact with each other and come into conflict with one another, and a lot of her poetry tries to resolve those conflicts. We will explore how race and gender interact in her poetry, and therefore, how race itself becomes a central concern of gender-formation.

Blackness, in the racist white American imagination, was a metaphor for forced inferiority. In Lorde's poetry, blackness is a metaphor for power. She often spells black with a capital "B" and white with a small-case "w", emphasizing her inversion of the traditional hierarchy. Blackness operates as a source of subversion, of fighting against the injustice of the past and the sometimes explicit and otherwise repressed racism of the present. Blackness is embodied in and by her; her woman's body is the site of subversive power. "The Black Unicorn" (1978) captures the restless spirit of the black creature she uses as a metonym for herself. The traditionally white mythic unicorn is now black, and she is "greedy", "impatient", "restless" for change in her "cold" country. She is "unrelenting", and she will strive until she finds change. The passive white creature of myth is transformed into an aggravated black horned creature that is still "not free" (Lorde, 1978).

Similarly, "Coal" (1976) is a declaration of the poet's recognition of blackness. She is "the total black, being spoken/ from the earth's inside" (ibid.). Her racial identity connects her to the earth, from the inside of which she emerges - her blackness is rudimentary and earthy, it comes from within. Lorde explores in this poem the trope of self-expression. Words, as she says, are coloured by the colour of those who pay to hear them. There are some words that she can articulate, but there are many others she is forced to swallow back, because she cannot express them. There exist contradictory forces in our minds that sometimes allow and sometimes disallow expression. The words that she can express are infused with greater meaning, with the sun "seeking like gypsies over my tongue/ to explode through my lips" (Lorde, 1976). The final two lines sum up her declaration:

I am Black because I come from the earth's inside
Now take my word for jewel in the open light.

(Lorde, 1976)

Gender operates in multiple ways. Even as the subversive is a woman, the oppressor could be a woman too. "Who Said It Was Simple" (1973) talks about the dismissive attitude of white women who believe they genuinely care for the plight of black women but who accept their privileges and hierarchies without introspection.

Perhaps the most important figures in her body of work exploring identity are her parents, the source of her becoming who she is. *Zami* explores Lorde's problematic relationship with her parents and particularly her mother in great depth. The poem "Inheritance-His" (1992) explores the difficult and often distrustful relationship she shared with her father. When she was young, her parents never dared openly acknowledge that colour was the reason they were discriminated against, often publicly and in the presence of their children. In the poem, Lorde recounts the threat of violence and the lack of trust that permeated their relationship. She also addresses the question of migrant identities. Her father's recollections of the Caribbean island of his birth, and the loss of identity he experienced upon emigrating, contribute to her own fissured identity. Her place of birth comes into conflict with her imagined (and on occasion imaginary) place of belonging, a lack of rootedness that typifies the postmodern condition. The silences, the distance and mutual recrimination in their relationship, as described in the poem, overshadow the memory of her father, who she mourns with a sense of both loss and dejection. Similarly, her relationship with her mother was a fraught one. As recounted poignantly in *Zami*, she first idolized her mother, then feared her, grew skeptical of her and finally grew apart from her, becoming an occasional visitor at home rather than a cherished daughter. The importance of birth and parental heritage are emphasized here in relation to identity and gender.

Here is the first verse of "To The Poet Who Happens To Be Black and The Black Poet Who Happens To Be a Woman" (1991):

I was born in the gut of Blackness
from between my mother's particular thighs
her waters broke upon blue-flowered lineoleum
and turn to slush in the Harlem cold
10 PM on a full moon's night
my head crested round as a clock
"You were so dark," my mother said
"I thought you were a boy."

(Lorde, 1991)

The search for the point of origin, and the location of identity in “Blackness”, are themes that feature prominently in her poetry and fiction. The constant desire to counter the “canceling” eyes of America, erasing the black presence, leads her to examine and re-examine her background and her point of origin. Naming or re-naming as a means of negotiating identity, then, becomes an important concern. Lorde writes in *Zami* that she changed her name, against her parents’ wishes, from Audrey to Audre to make it appear more symmetrical with Lorde. The title of the novel/ fictional autobiography itself emphasizes naming and the process of re-naming. Upon her deathbed, Lorde performed an African naming ritual to rename herself *Gambda Adisa*, which means “Warrior: She Who Makes Her Meaning Known”.

Check Your Progress:

i) *Discuss Lorde’s relationship with her parents, focusing on the question of identity.*

ii) *What aspects are most prominent in Lorde’s poems?*

3.9 IMTIAZ DHARKER

Imtiaz Dharker (born 1954) is a Scottish Muslim poet, artist and documentary film-maker born to Pakistani parents and brought up in Glasgow. She has worked and lived both in the UK and in Bombay in India, and has published several collections of poetry. Her themes include those of home, identity, displacement, migration, travel, patriarchy and repression. Gender, from the perspective of her poetry, can be understood as an aspect of the multicultural and transnational experience of displacement and migration. Gender is yet another part of what makes her feel estranged from, and conversely, connected to society. She may be seen as a poet of global artistic flows, juggling multiple cultural selves and identities in different places and cultural contexts.

Let us look at her poem, "Purdah" (1989), quoted in full below:

One day they said
she was old enough to learn some shame.
She found it came quite naturally.

Purdah is a kind of safety.
The body finds a place to hide.
The cloth fans out against the skin
much like the earth that falls
on coffins after they put dead men in.

People she has known
stand up, sit down as they have always done.
But they make different angles
in the light, their eyes aslant,
a little sly.

She half-remembers things
from someone else's life,
perhaps from yours, or mine -
carefully carrying what we do not own:
between the thighs a sense of sin.

We sit still, letting the cloth grow
a little closer to our skin.
A light filters inward
through our bodies' walls.
Voices speak inside us,
echoing in the places we have just left.

She stands outside herself,
 sometimes in all four corners of a room.
 Wherever she goes, she is always
 inching past herself,
 as if she were a clod of earth
 and the roots as well,
 scratching for a hold
 between the first and second rib.

Passing constantly out of her own hands,
 into the corner of someone else's eyes . . .
 while the doors keep opening
 inward and again
 inward.

(Dharker, 1989)

'Purdah' is a poem that captures the essence of her engagement with the female body. She explores the socio-cultural dynamics that come into play in such gender-specific religious enforcements and dicta, uncovering the manifold layers of meaning contained in cultural emblems like the purdah. The cloth that purportedly has a protective function is compared to the cloth that covers the coffin of the dead, metaphorically equating the seclusion and ostracism of purdah to death. The girl herself is hesitant to assert herself. She feels like a vestigial presence, unable to move or shake off the burden that has been imposed on her. A certain heaviness lies at the heart of the poem, conveying the immobility of the subject of purdah and the physical, emotional, mental and social weight of the veil itself.

Check Your Progress:

What are your thoughts on the veil in the context of Dharker's poem as a point of reference? Explain briefly.

3.10 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have looked at different examples of postmodern poetry from different periods of time and geographical locations. The themes and preoccupations are diverse and varied. Neruda's poems are erotic and suffused with longing; Plath's poems here depict different kinds of femininity; Rich deals with the problems of patriarchy as well as the inversion of set strictures on desire; Walker explores different experiences of womanhood; Lorde reconfigures the racial landscape of the American imagination; and Dharker contends with the experiences of religious repression. Love, desire and subversion form the vertices of our discussion in this unit.

While critical opinions on postmodern poetry vary dramatically, there is some consensus on the experience of the postmodern reader. A commonly accepted feature is accessibility. In its direct treatment of issues such as gender, postmodern poetry, though sometimes obscure, does tend to emphasize unmediated contact with the reader. In its direct tone, unmediated knowledge and mode of address, the relationship between the reader and the work is characterized by a kind of immediacy and directness sometimes not available in esoteric high modernist poetry. In the instances that we have discussed in this unit, we have found the treatment of central themes to be direct and accessible, taking the reader to the heart of the issues under scrutiny.

3.11 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) How do absence and presence impact love in Neruda's poetry? Discuss in the context of gender and postmodernism.
- 2) Describe Plath's empathy for the marginalized woman, with the help of examples from her poems.
- 3) What are the different ways in which intimacy can be described? Refer to the sections on Rich and Walker.
- 4) Race is an important preoccupation in Lorde's work. Elaborate with reference to the section on Lorde.
- 5) How does Dharker imagine the purdah? Analyse in the context of theoretical frameworks already familiar to you.

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3.13 SUGGESTED READINGS

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