TEZPUR UNIVERSITY


MASTER OF ARTS

# ENGLISH

CENTRE FOR OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

# MEG 403: Women's Writing in English

## BLOCK I

CENTRE FOR OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

TEZPUR UNIVERSITY (A CENTRAL UNIVERSITY)

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- To offer various programmes under lifelong learning contributing to the local and regional level requirements and as per the need of the society at large.
- To undertake various research and academic activities for furtherance of distance education in the region.
- To contribute to conserve and promote cultural heritage, literature, traditional knowledge and environment conducting short programmes, workshops, seminars and research in interdisciplinary field.

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## MEG 403: Women's Writing in English

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# BLOCK I

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# MODULE I: RISE OF FEMINISM

## *UNIT 1: FEMINIST THEORY: AN INTRODUCTION*

**UNIT STRUCTURE**



## *1.0 INTRODUCTION*

This unit is the threshold to the module titled **Women's Writing in English** (MEG 403) prescribed for the fourth semester students. It will, initially, introduce **Feminism** as a broad political and socio-cultural movement and then move on to **Feminist literary criticism** as a subset of the broad movement. This unit will therefore equip the learners with the necessary background information so that they can advance to the subsequent units, where they will have to deal with specific women writers chosen for this course.

## *1.2 LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

This unit will enable you to

- get an overview of the broad strands of feminist movement and trace its historical development
- understand feminist literary criticism and its basic arguments
- prepare the ground for understanding the theorists and their works included in the subsequent units

## *1.3 FEMINISM: AN OVERVIEW*

Feminism, as a broad umbrella term, refers to a range of socio-political and cultural movements that seek to achieve an equal status of women with men in different areas of day to day life. It bases its argument on the assumption that societies treat women on a lesser or inferior status than men, as a result of which, women are often deprived of their basic rights. The Feminist movement seeks to give women an equal footing with men by fighting for equal rights and against gender stereotypes. Right to vote, equal wages, property rights, reproductive rights (including right to contraceptives and abortion) are some of the issues that feminist movements have engaged with throughout the decades.

Although French philosopher Charles Fourier is credited with having coined the word 'feminism' in 1837, the Oxford English Dictionary records 1852 as the year of the first appearance of 'feminist' and 1895 as the year for 'feminism'. However, if we look at the history of modern feminist movements, scholars usually chart four waves of their development. The first wave of feminism began towards the end of 19th century and extended to the early decades of 20th century. The second wave of feminism started towards the middle of the 20th century and the developments of the third wave of feminism were seen towards the end of the 20th century. We are now at the fourth wave of the feminist movement. It has started towards the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century. In the following sections, you will get a detailed trajectory of the waves of the feminist movement.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. Define the term 'Feminism'

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2. Who coined the word 'Feminism'?

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1. Name some of the issues that feminist movements have engaged with throughout the decades.

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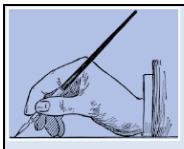
## *1.4 THE WAVES OF FEMINISM*

Till now, there are four waves of the feminist movement. This section will discuss, in detail, these four waves.

### First Wave

The first wave of feminism began towards the end of 19th century and extended to the early decades of 20th century. It mainly stressed on giving women voting rights and property rights. In England after a series of legislative procedures backed by strong activism, the government passed the 'Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act' in 1928. Remedying the century long disparity against women, this Act extended the franchise to all persons over the age of 21 on equal terms. Emmeline Pankhurst, Wilhemina Drucker, Lucretia

Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony were some of the most influential activists of the First wave of feminism. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, whose short story 'The Yellow Wallpaper' is prescribed for this course, was an influential feminist of the first wave. With the granting of women's suffrage in most of the countries, the First wave of feminism came to an end.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. When did the first wave of feminism begin? What were its main concerns?

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2. When did women in England secure the right to vote?

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3. Name some of the first wave feminists.

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4. Name a famous short story written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

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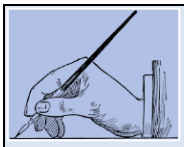
## Second Wave

The second wave of feminism started towards the middle of the 20th century. After the First wave secured franchise for women, the second wave focussed on legal and social equality for them. It sought to end gender discrimination by encouraging women to understand the subtle nuances of social inequality. The activists believed that knowing those nuances would help women better fight them. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) is a seminal work of the early phase of second wave feminism. Carol Hanisch's slogan "The Personal is Political" is a significant marker of the second wave feminist movement. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) was an influential work that sparked second wave feminism in America.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. When did the second wave of feminism begin? What were its main concerns?

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2. Who wrote the book- *The Second Sex* (1949)?

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3. Name some of the second wave feminists.

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4. Who wrote the book- *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)?

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5. Name the feminist associated with the slogan- 'The Personal is Political'.

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## Third Wave

The third wave of feminism started towards the end of the 20th century. The credit of using the term 'third wave' to point to this generation of feminists is given to Rebecca Walker in her article 'Becoming the Third Wave'(1992). This wave stressed on the individuality and diversity within the broad feminist movement. Although the basic issue of giving women equal status remained the same, what differed from the earlier waves was that the third wave feminists pointed to the differences within the movement itself. They criticised the tendency of 'upper middle class white' feminists of essentializing or rarefying the tenets of the feminist movement and instead, argued for heterogeneity with respect to intersectional concerns of class, caste, race, colour, sexuality, etc. Gloria Anzaldua, Bell Hooks, Audre Lorde, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, Maxine Hong Kingston are some of the writers of third wave feminism.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. When did the third wave of feminism begin? What were its main concerns?

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2. Who coined the term ‘third wave’ and where?

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3. Name some of the third wave feminists.

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## Fourth Wave

This is the current wave of the feminist movement. It started towards the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century and is marked by the extensive use of technology in advancing its goals. Till now, the main focus of fourth wave feminists are issues like harassment of women at streets and workplace, sexual harassment and rape culture. #YesAllWomen, One Billion Rising, #MeToo are some of the fourth wave feminist campaigns which have been carried out by the extensive use of social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. When did the fourth wave of feminism begin? What were its main concerns?

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2. Give a few examples of fourth wave feminism campaigns.

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Although we have attempted to give a general idea of the waves of the feminist movement, what we need to understand is that we cannot fix them into water-tight compartments with respect to time. That is, the ideals of one wave can be seen running over into the next wave. Moreover, an issue that was taken up during one wave can be seen being taken up in not the immediately next, but in a subsequent wave. This shows the dynamic nature of the movement itself which is sure to diversify into different forms in the near future. The next section will give you an introduction to feminist literary criticism.

## *1.5 FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM*

After getting an insight into the basic nature of the feminist movement and its historical development through the years (the waves), we are now in a position to delve deep into feminist literary criticism.

**Feminist literary criticism** is that branch of literary criticism that employs the basic principles of feminism to interpret, analyse and critique literature. Guided by the politics of the feminist movement, this school of thought interrogates the ways and means through which literature has been the prerogative of patriarchal domination throughout the ages. By looking into the language, substance, narrative structure, publication politics, etc. of the texts, this school of thought

questions the way in which texts have been traditionally looked at and seeks to inaugurate new and alternative ways of reading them.

M.H. Abrams' *A Handbook of Literary Terms* underlines the following arguments underlying feminist literary criticism-

- ✓ The basic view is that Western civilization is pervasively patriarchal (ruled by the father)—that is, it is male-centred and controlled, and is organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal, and artistic. From the Hebrew Bible and Greek philosophic writings to the present, the female tends to be defined by negative reference to the male as the human norm, hence as an Other, or kind of non-man, by her lack of the identifying male organ, of male capabilities, and of the male character traits that are presumed, in the patriarchal view, to have achieved the most important scientific and technical inventions and the major works of civilization and culture. Women themselves are taught, in the process of being socialized, to internalize the reigning patriarchal ideology (that is, the conscious and unconscious presuppositions about male superiority), and so are conditioned to derogate their own sex and to cooperate in their own subordination.
- ✓ It is widely held that while one's sex as a man or woman is determined by anatomy, the prevailing concepts of gender—of the traits that are conceived to constitute what is masculine and what is feminine in temperament and behaviour— are largely, if not entirely, social constructs that were generated by the pervasive patriarchal biases of our civilization. As Simone de Beauvoir put it, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. . . . It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature . . . which is described as feminine." By this cultural process, the masculine in our culture has come to be widely identified as active, dominating, adventurous, rational, creative; the feminine, by systematic opposition to such traits, has come to be identified as passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional, and conventional.

- ✓ The further claim is that this patriarchal (or "masculinist," or "androcentric") ideology pervades those writings which have been traditionally considered great literature, and which until recently have been written mainly by men for men. Typically, the most highly regarded literary works focus on male protagonists— Oedipus, Ulysses, Hamlet, Tom Jones, Faust, the Three Musketeers, Captain Ahab, Huck Finn, Leopold Bloom—who embody masculine traits and ways of feeling and pursue masculine interests in masculine fields of action. To these males, the female characters, when they play a role, are marginal and subordinate, and are represented either as complementary and subservient to, or in opposition to, masculine desires and enterprises. Such works, lacking autonomous female role models, and implicitly addressed to male readers, either leave the woman reader an alien outsider or else solicit her to "identify against herself" by taking up the position of the male subject and so assuming male values and ways of perceiving, feeling, and acting. It is often held, in addition, that the traditional categories and criteria for analyzing and appraising literary works, although represented in standard critical theory as objective, disinterested, and universal, are in fact infused with masculine assumptions, interests, and ways of reasoning, so that the standard selection and rankings, the prevailing canon, and the critical treatments of literary works have in fact been tacitly but thoroughly gender-biased. (Abrams, 101-102)

These three basic arguments govern the critical tools of feminist literary criticism. For example, in Simone de Beauvoir, we find an existentialist approach to feminist thought. On the other hand, Virginia Woolf takes up a materialist approach by focusing on giving women a personal space and financial independence in her work *A Room of One's Own* (1929). In her celebrated work, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Writers from Charlotte Bronte to Doris Lessing* (1977), Elaine Showalter coined the term **'gynocriticism'** to advocate for the creation of a female framework suitable for the analysis of their own literature. Again, French feminists like Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray have engaged themselves with the psychoanalytic turn in feminist literary criticism.

They brought in, criticised and questioned concepts from Freud and Lacan to enrich the theoretical corpus. Helene Cixous coined the term **'l'ecriture feminine'** in her essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975) to mean an exclusively feminine writing that is free from the domination of the male-centric language. She urges women writers to write with 'white ink' and attempt to overthrow the hegemony of male writers and the writing tradition. However, with the poststructuralist turn in literary theory, there have been attacks on some of the basic terms like woman, feminist, etc. Judith Butler in her books *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (1993) and *Undoing Gender* (2004) problematizes these terms. She adopts a linguistic-discursive model of feminist criticism and expands the ambit of feminist theory to include concerns of LGBTQ+ individuals and such other fluid identities. Again, with the influence of postcolonial theory, third and fourth wave feminists have adopted an intersectional approach to feminist theory. They have included concerns of race, class, caste, nationality in an intersection with women's issues. For example, Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies in their remarkable essay 'Ecofeminism' have written about the intersection of environmental concerns with feminist theory. On the other hand, Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her seminal work 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses'(1986) criticises the hegemony of the first world feminists in terms of ideology, methods and politics and advocates a redefinition of first world feminist-third world feminist relationship. She questions the discursive construction of the category of the third world woman as a homogenous, victimized stereotype that needs to be rescued by the first world feminists and instead calls for a mutual understanding of heterogeneity within the feminist framework. Her work is indeed reflective of the heterogeneity and fluid nature of feminist theory.

Another recent term that is associated with feminism is **'postfeminism'**. It refers to a reaction against feminism since the 1980s. Although initially aimed at the second wave feminists, this term currently refers to a wide range of theoretical angles that takes a critical standpoint towards previous feminist discourses and includes newer challenges as well as strategies. Although not anti-feminist,

postfeminism casts a critical glance towards the strategies adopted by the different waves of feminism and highlights the possibility of theoretical as well as methodological evolution.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. What is feminist literary criticism?

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2. Who coined the term 'Gynocriticism' and where?

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3. Who coined the term 'l' ecriture feminine' and where?

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4. Who is the author of 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses' (1986)?

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5. Name a few books of Judith Butler

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6. What do you mean by postfeminism?

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## *1.6 SUMMING UP*

In this unit, you have got an overview of the broad strands of feminist movement and traced its historical development through the four waves. You also understood the basic nature of feminist literary criticism and its arguments. Familiarizing you with certain key names of feminist theory and literary criticism, this unit has prepared the ground for understanding the theorists and their works included in the subsequent units.

## *1.7 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS*

1. Give an overview of the broad strands of the Feminist movement.

2. What do you mean by Feminist theory and literary criticism? Describe, in your own words, its basic arguments.

3. Have you witnessed any contemporary campaigns of the fourth wave feminist movement? What is your experience? Discuss in your own words.

4. Is there any difference among the different waves of the feminist movement? If yes, what? Discuss in your own words.

5. Describe Postfeminism with its history and trends. How does it differ from the other waves of feminism.

## *1.8 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS*


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## *UNIT 2: SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR: THE SECOND SEX (SELECTIONS) ELAINE SHOWALTER: "THE FEMALE TRADITION" FROM A LITERATURE OF THEIR OWN*

**UNIT STRUCTURE**





## *2.0 INTRODUCTION*

This unit will introduce readers to two foundational writers of feminist thought, namely Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) and Elaine Showalter (1941- ). It will acquaint them with two key texts by Beauvoir and Showalter respectively which have moulded feminist literary thought and criticism. Thus, advancing the introduction begun in the previous unit, this unit will guide the readers into new territories of seminal writers and their influential works.

## *2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

This unit will enable you to

• acquaint yourself with the life and works of two major feminist theorists, namely Simone de Beauvoir and Elaine Showalter.

• read critically the selected texts which have shaped feminist thought and literary criticism.

• prepare the ground for understanding the writers and their works included in the subsequent units

## *2.2 SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR: LIFE AND WORKS*

Simone de Beauvoir (1908-86) was a French feminist, philosopher, novelist and social activist. She was born in Paris to a middle class family with a staunch Catholic mother. She herself was a strong believer till the age of 14 when she experienced a crisis of faith. Being an intelligent woman and with encouragement from her father, Simone studied at la Sorbonne, Paris. She was one of the first women to have graduated from this prestigious institute as women had only recently been granted access to higher education in France. She later attended a course at the École Normale Supérieure where she met her lifelong partner Jean Paul Sartre. She was ranked second (Sartre was ranked first) in the Agrégation, France's highly competitive postgraduate examination. Beauvoir's first novel *She Came to Stay* was published in 1943. She published a series of essays after this before coming to write *The Second Sex* in 1949.

Her *The Second Sex* (1949) is acknowledged by many feminists as the "single most important theoretical work" of the 20th century. It is a foundational text in feminist theory and a powerful exposition on existentialist philosophy. Although she wrote a number of novels, philosophical essays and life writings, in this unit we shall only concentrate on a selection from *The Second Sex* with a critical appreciation of the same.

## *2.3 READING THE SECOND SEX (1949) (SELECTIONS)*

### 2.3.1 *The Second Sex* (1949): an overview

*The Second Sex* was first published in French as *Le Deuxieme Sexe* in1949. It was originally published in two volumes as *Facts and Myths* and *Lived Experience* (*Les faits et les mythes* and *L'expérience vécue*). According to Judith

Thurman, most of her research to write this book took place in about 14 months between 1946 and 1949. Some of the chapters initially appeared in a French Journal titled *Les Temps modernes* that was co-edited by Jean Paul Sartre and Beauvoir herself.

*The Second Sex* was divided into several parts. While, volume one titled *Facts and Myths* was sub-divided into three parts, volume two into four. While it is now established that some of Beauvoir's data of biological sciences may have been revised by later research, the basic tenet of the book holds true even after almost a century. Her question "Biology is not enough to give an answer to the question that is before us: why is woman the Other?" is still valid. One of the salient features of the book is how Beauvoir challenged established theories, including that of Freud's psychoanalysis. She argues that Freud's thesis about the castration complex and the Electra complex (a girl's fascination for her father) is based on a "masculine model":

> It is not the lack of the penis that causes this complex, but rather women's total situation; if the little girl feels penis envy it is only as the symbol of the privileges enjoyed by boys. The place the father holds in the family, the universal predominance of males, her own education— everything confirms her in her belief in masculine superiority. (74)

After a detailed discussion of biological and psychological sciences in volume one, Beauvoir turns to historical materialism. She discusses Engel's thesis in his book *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* that with the appearance of private property man not only becomes the master of slaves and of the earth but also the proprietor of woman, "this was the great historical defeat of the feminine sex'' (85). However she argues, "In our attempt to discover woman we shall not reject certain contributions of biology, of psychology, and of historical materialism; but we shall hold that the body, the sexual life, and the resources of technology exist concretely for man only in so far as he grasps them in total perspective of his existence" (91). Another important part of *The Second Sex* is Beauvoir's discussion of myths where she discusses writers like D. H. Lawrence and Stendhal. The excerpt that we have chosen for this study is taken

from the first part of the second volume of the book. It is titled 'Childhood' and forms a part of her discussion on the formative years of a young girl's growth.

### 2.3.2 Childhood

The first sentence of 'Childhood' is Beauvoir's oft quoted line "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (295). She argues that biological, psychological or economic fate do not determine the figure of the human female, it is "civilization as a whole that produces this creature" (295). In early childhood, a girl and a boy discover the world in a similar manner; they may share the same interests and pleasures. But gradually "the influence of others upon the child" indoctrinates them. A girl is made to wear sweet dresses, "her tears and caprices are viewed indulgently", but the little boy is reprimanded for crying, "A man doesn't cry" (298). While the male child is encouraged to be independent of adults, the girl is protected more and more under new rules and regulations. Some boys may initially resent this new found freedom; and may see this as being cared for less by his parents. But the more he asserts his individuality, the more he would be rewarded. The opposite is true for the girl. She would be praised for being passive rather than being active.

The great advantage enjoyed by the boy is that his mode of existence in relation to others leads him to assert his subjective freedom…Climbing trees, fighting with his companions, facing them in rough games, … he is aware of his body as a means for dominating nature and as a weapon for fighting… to scorn pain, to keep back the tears… In woman, on the contrary, there is from the beginning a conflict between her autonomous existence and her objective self, her ''being-the-other'; she is taught that to please she must try to please, she must make herself the object; she should therefore renounce her autonomy. (307-08)

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

- Do you remember being treated by your family or society differently because you are a boy/girl?
- Do you see your parents expecting you to go to the neighbourhood shop and fetch groceries as you grow up to be a teenage boy? Do your parents ask you not to roam about/spend too long

in the neighbourhood shop if you are a teenage girl?

After discussing the differential childhood treatment of the girl and the boy by the family and the society, Beauvoir explores how the female body become a site of shame as the young girl's body changes contours. The crisis is particularly heightened once she attains puberty. As the young boy attains more freedom, mobility and asserts himself as he grows, the reverse is often true for girls; restrictions on her increase. As a result, the girl loses confidence in her self and forever remains a passive object throughout her life.

From a critical standpoint, although some of the tenets of *The Second Sex* have been fore grounded in the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft (A Vindication of the Rights of Women, 1792) and John Stuart Mill (Subjection of Women, 1869), Beauvoir's work is significant as it explains the developmental psychology of a girl child. While Mary Wollstonecraft and J.S. Mill talked about the necessity of civil, political and economic rights for women, Beauvoir hits at the fundamental nature of a child's upbringing by its family and social institutions. Therefore, this text that has come to symbolise a ground breaking milestone in the women's movement. By giving the slogan "one is not born, rather becomes a woman", it became the founding text of the women's movement in the 1960s leading to a radical challenge to conventional gender roles. Beauvoir is often celebrated as an Existentialist feminist largely because of her philosophical training and the questions of the self and the other that she engages in her works. Though recent feminists have intensely reviewed this text and offered critiques as well, the seminal status of *The Second Sex* remains intact.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. Name a few works written by Simone de Beauvoir.

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2. When was *The Second Sex* Published?

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2. Discuss the major arguments as put forward by Beauvoir in her celebrated work *The Second Sex*.

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## *2.4 ELAINE SHOWALTER: LIFE AND WORKS*

Elaine Showalter was born in Massachusetts in 1941. She was educated in Bryn Mawr College and attained her PhD from University of California, Davis. She taught English and Women's Studies at Rutgers University before joining the University of Princeton in 1984. While *A Literature of Their Own* is her first major book, she continues to work on Victorian women writers, hysteria, fin de Siècle (turn of the 19th century) writers and on the tradition of women writers in the United States of America. Her texts include *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980* (1985), *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (1990), *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (1991); *Hystories: Historical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (1997), *Inventing Herself: Claiming a Feminist Intellectual Heritage* (2001), *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* (2005), and *A Jury of Her Peers* (2009). She has edited several volumes, including *The New Feminist Criticism* (1985) and *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin de Siècle* (1993).

Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Writers, from Charlotte Bronte to Doris Lessing* (1977) is regarded as a seminal text in feminist literary criticism. It was published just two years before another classic which we shall discuss in a later unit, The Madwoman in the Attic (1979). While Kate Millet's Sexual Politics (1970) had inaugurated a feminist tradition of rereading male writer's texts, Showalter and Gilbert and Gubar recovered the lost history of a female tradition of writing in English since the nineteenth century. Thus the 1970s decade saw a phenomenal growth of feminist revisionist history in the Western academia. Showalter is credited to have developed the concept of gynocriticsm, "a female framework for the analysis of women's literature".

## *2.5 READING THE "THE FEMALE TRADITION" FROM A LITERATURE OF THEIR OWN (1977)*

Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Writers, from Charlotte Bronte to Doris Lessing* (1977) is regarded as a seminal text in feminist literary criticism. The title of the book is part of a sentence from John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869). It also strongly echoes Virginia Woolf's famous essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Showalter's book is divided into several chapters. We shall read the first chapter titled "The Female Tradition" in this unit.

The book begins with a quotation from G H Lewes's essay "The lady Novelist" (1852) where Lewes argues that one major "weakness" of the literature of the lady novelists is that "it has been too much of a literature of imitation" (3). Showalter then quotes John Stuart Mill's ideas about female creativity in *The Subjection of Women* (1869) as Mill thought that "If women lived in a different country from men, and had never read any of their writings, they would have a literature of their own" (3).

According to Showalter the study of women's literature in English has been reduced to the study of a few greats, Jane Austen, the Brontes, George Eliot and Virginia Woolf. Her book is path breaking in the way it recovers a female literary subculture beyond the established traditions of literary criticisms where

the "discussion of women writers has been so inaccurate, fragmented, and partisan" (6). Showalter studies the female literary tradition in the English novel from the generation of the Brontes to that of Doris Lessing's. She is particularly interested in the question of why women began to write for money or what their professional self-image was. She divides three major phases of women writers across literary cultures. The first phase is of imitation; in this phase most women writers seem to internalise and imitate prevailing cultural codes and social roles in their writings. The second phase is one of protest; women writers challenge the set social standards and advocate rights of women. Finally there is a phase of self-discovery; a turning inward- away from the binary oppositions and a search for identity. Showalter calls these stages Feminine, Feminist, Female. The Feminine phase is identified as the period from "the appearance of the male pseudonym in the 1840s to the death of George Eliot in 1880"; the Feminist phase from 1880 to 1920 and Female phase from 1920 to 1960.

Showalter warns that these are not rigid categories, sometimes the phases overlap and there may be feminist elements in feminine writing and vice versa. Moreover a single writer's career may embody elements of these different phases.

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

Three Phases according to Elaine Showalter:

Feminine: Imitation of prevailing norms; 1840s—1880

Feminist: Protest against social standards; 1880—1920

Female: Self-discovery; an inward journey; 1920—1960

In order to discuss women novelists of the mid nineteenth century Showalter traces the origins of women novelists in the 1750s and even earlier and argues that most eighteenth century women writers exploited the stereotype of the helpless feminine prototype.

The middle class ideology of "the angel in the house" and "the proper lady" solidified during the Victorian period. As a result of this, the women writers of this period were acutely conscious of their disputable status of trying to enter the

respectable, male book market. One of the ways in which they resolved this contradiction was by adopting a male pseudonym. Thus the pseudonym marked an important historical shift for women writers.

Showalter's list of nineteenth-century feminine novelists includes the Brontes, Mrs Gaskell, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Harriet Martineau, George Eliot, Charlotte Yonge, Dinah Mulock Craik, Margaret Oliphant and others. Although women novelist continued to publish a number of novels in a variety of themes, their novels were largely read within the framework of "domestic realism". The feminine novelists faced a peculiar challenge. On the one hand they were acutely conscious of appearing unwomanly as they had entered an otherwise masculine domain of writing and publishing, on the other hand they also often felt humiliated and condescended by male critics. According to Showalter, the feminine novelists reconciled to this challenge by propagating an ideology of femininity, self-sacrifice and submission to a disciplined patriarchy rather than a challenge to such ideology in their novels. The definition of a woman's work often meant work for others rather than for herself or her development. Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-61)'s *Aurora Leigh* (1857) is an embodiment of the struggle of the young Aurora who claims that she "too have [a] vocation work to do" against her suitor Romney's offer of marriage that "sees the woman as the complement". George Eliot too raises the question of women's vocation in *Romola* (1863) where "the duty of obedience ends and the duty of resistance begins". This remained a fundamental question for Victorian women, particularly those who sought a vocation outside of domestic roles. Victorian ideals of the proper lady and the angel in the house ensured that young girls were socially conditioned towards self-repression, and concealment rather than free expression of desire. Some women novelists were successful in dramatizing inner conflict in fiction. And some others transferred women's ambition for money and mobility onto successful male characters while punishing ambitious heroines for alleged social transgressions.

An important sub-genre that emerged among women novelists of this period is that of protest fiction. Accordingly, in the social novels of 1840s, and

1850s and the problem novels of 1860s and 1870s, women writers pushed the boundaries of their creative work. By the 1870s, novelists such as Mary Braddon, Rhoda Boughton and Florence Marryat "explored radical female protests against marriage and women's economic oppression, although they maintained feminine conventions that demanded the erring heroine's destruction" (23).

According to Showalter, the 1880s saw the beginning of a Feminist phase in women's novels which confronted Victorian sexual morality and patriarchal conventions, often subverting the world order in fantasy writings. These writers escaped to Amazonian utopias in their fictional world and created suffragette sisterhoods in the real to challenge dominant social modes, including a claim in the polity. They used pseudonyms such as Sarah Grand epitomising their newfound confidence. Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird, Elizabeth Robins and George Egerton are some of the notable feminist writers. Apart from the literary world, many feminist writers were involved in political campaigns for prostitutes and working women, the suffrage movement and so on.

The Female phase marks a departure from earlier generations in their courageous self-exploration. This includes writers such Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson, Katherine Mansfield among others. However, their emphasis on stylistic, formal and theoretical literature meant that these writings often moved away from "exploring physical experience of women" (28).

Women novelists of the 1960s entered a new phase particularly enthused by the International women's movement of the 1960s. Iris Murdoch, Margaret Drabble, Doris Lessing, Muriel Spark are some of the celebrated names. Lessing's *Golden Notebook* is particularly celebrated as a masterpiece.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. Name a few works written by Elaine Showalter

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2. Name the three phases as pointed out by Showalter.

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3. What is Elaine Showalter's main argument regarding women's writing? How does she describe the three phases in relation to it?

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## *2.6 SUMMING UP*

In this unit, you became familiar with two important writers of Feminist Criticism, namely Simone de Beauvoir and Elaine Showalter. Beauvoir's ground-breaking work, *The Second Sex* (1949) became the foundation stone for Feminist activism and literary criticism. On the other hand, Elaine Showalter in her work 'The Female Tradition' charted a history of the female literary subculture starting from the 1840s to the 1960s.

By highlighting three important phases in this tradition, she upheld the trials and tribulations as well as self-discovery of the women writers throughout the years. Thus, acquainting you with the life and works of these two influential women writers, this unit takes you one step forward in the prescribed module.

## *2.7 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS*

1. Situate Simone de Beauvoir in the Feminist Critical Tradition and discuss her major arguments as put forward in *The Second Sex* (1949)

2. Situate Elaine Showalter in the Feminist Critical Tradition and discuss her main arguments as put forward in 'The Female Tradition'. How does she describe the three phases in relation to it?

3. Compare and contrast the critical standpoints of Beauvoir and Showalter respectively.

4. Do you find any changes in the Feminist literary and critical tradition from that described by Beauvoir and Showalter respectively? Give a suitable argument.

## *2.9 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS*


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## *UNIT 3: SANDRA M. GILBERT AND SUSAN GUBAR: "INFECTION IN THE SENTENCE: THE WOMAN WRITER AND THE ANXIETY OF AUTHORSHIP" FROM THE MADWOMAN IN THE ATTIC*

## *TORIL MOI: "FEMINIST, FEMALE, FEMININE"*

## *GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK: "THREE WOMEN'S TEXTS AND A CRITIQUE OF IMPERIALISM"*

**UNIT STRUCTURE**





## *3.0 INTRODUCTION*

This unit is a follow-up of the two previous units. It will introduce readers to some major feminist theorists, namely Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Toril Moi and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak respectively. It will acquaint them with their key texts which have moulded feminist literary thought and criticism. Thus, advancing the discussion begun in the previous unit, this unit will guide the readers into new territories of seminal writers and their influential works.

## *3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

This unit will enable you to

- acquaint yourself with the life and works of some major feminist theorists, namely, Sandra M. Gilbert (1936- ) and Susan Gubar (1944- ), Toril Moi (1953- ) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1942- ) respectively
- read critically the selected texts which have shaped feminist thought and literary criticism.
- prepare the ground for understanding the writers and their works included in the subsequent units

## *3.2 SANDRA M. GILBERT AND SUSAN GUBAR: LIFE AND WORKS*

Sandra M. Gilbert (1936----), Professor Emerita of English at the University of California, Davis, is an American literary critic and poet who has published in the fields of feminist literary criticism, feminist theory, and psychoanalytic criticism. Susan D. Gubar (born November 30, 1944) is an American author and distinguished Professor Emerita of English and Women's Studies at Indiana University. Both of them are, perhaps, best known for their collaborative critical work, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979). Among other prizes and honours, they were awarded the Ivan Sandrof Lifetime Achievement Award of the National Book Critics Circle in 2012.

*The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) is widely recognized as a text central to second-wave feminism. It is celebrated as a seminal text in the recovery of a female tradition of writing in the British and American literary canon. While they largely concentrate on "great" writers in their analysis, their attempt to connect and establish women writers and their literary foremothers through a continuous process of rereading is a novel idea. Published within a few years of Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), these two texts are often read together to get a glimpse of the vast female literary subculture of the nineteenth century British and American tradition.

## *3.3 READING "INFECTION IN THE SENTENCE: THE WOMAN WRITER AND THE ANXIETY OF AUTHORSHIP"*

"Infection in the Sentence: the Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship" is a chapter from Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's celebrated work *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). The title of this chapter is a part of a line from one of Emily Dickinson's poem which the writers quote among other texts in the beginning of the chapter:

A Word dropped careless on a Page

May stimulate an eye

When folded in perpetual seam

The Wrinkled Maker lie

Infection in the Sentence breeds

We may inhale Despair

At distances of Centuries

From the Malaria

The symbol of disease engulfs the entire chapter. In this chapter, Gilbert and Gubar undertake a revision of Harold Bloom's enormously influential Freudian theory of "the anxiety of influence". According to Gilbert and Gubar, Bloom had argued that an artist is eternally anxious that "he is not his own creator and that the works of his predecessors, existing before and beyond him, assumes essential priority over his writings" (290) and that a strong poet may always be in a heroic warfare with his precursor. Thus, a man can only become a poet by invalidating his poetic father (290). Thus Bloom's "model of literary history is intensely (even exclusively) male, and necessarily patriarchal" (290). The crucial question that arises is, "Where does the female poet fit in?" Does she want to annihilate a "forefather" or a "foremother"? What she can find no models, no precursors?" As Western literary history is overwhelmingly patriarchal, "anxiety of influence" is

symbolic of the psychosexual exclusion of women. According to Gilbert and Gubar "a female poet does not experience "anxiety of influence" in the same way as her male counterpart would" because on the one hand the female writer's male precursors incarnate patriarchal authority stereotyping her subjectivity as significantly different from theirs, and, on the other hand, the masculine authority of the act of writing seems to be in conflict with the female writer's gendered socialisation. "Thus the "anxiety of influence" that a male poet experiences is felt by a female poet as an even more primary "anxiety of authorship"—a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a "precursor" the act of writing will isolate or destroy her (291).

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

1. Do you think that women writers think differently?
2. If yes, is the difference a product of biology or socialisation?

Unlike the male artist's struggle with his precursors to establish himself, the female artist is caught up in a far more fundamental struggle to redefine not only her writing but also herself. The claim of becoming an author is in conflict with her social conditioning of the self-abnegating woman. And in such a context, the presence of a female precursor may become a source of inspiration and vindication against patriarchy rather than a threat to be denied. However, most eighteenth and nineteenth century women writers struggled in isolation often extremely self-conscious of declaring themselves authors which in turn is etymologically close to authority, power from which women have been systematically kept out. Thus, the will to write itself may be seen as an eccentricity, a deviance among these early women authors. Therefore, Emily Dickinson's consciousness of "infection in the sentence" is symbolic of the psychosexual struggle of these early writers.

Thus, "anxiety of authorship" is far more complex than "anxiety of influence" as it is coupled with the sense of the loneliness of the female artist,

alienation from male predecessors and a need for a female audience and her dread for patriarchal authority. All these together create a sense of "inferiorization". Elaine Showalter has argued how women writers participate in a literary subculture with its own distinctive literary traditions away from the male-dominated one. Gilbert and Gubar extend the idea of this subculture to suggest that there is a dark side to the female literary subculture. Unlike the dichotomy of father-son struggle in Bloom's model, women writers internalise a sense of inferiority as they struggle to articulate feelings, emotions otherwise reserved to be assigned by male writers to women characters. Thus "handed down not from one woman to another but from the stern literary "fathers" of patriarchy to all their "inferiorized" female descendants, it is in many ways germs of a disease or, at any rate, a disaffection, a disturbance, a distrust, that spreads like a stain throughout the style and structure of much literature by women. . . before the twentieth century" (293).

Therefore, many eighteenth and nineteenth foremothers struggled against oppressive social structures in isolation that almost felt like illness, alienation even madness. They grew up in societies where women were warned that if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters. Gilbert and Gubar say, "In other words the "female diseases" from which Victorian women suffered were not always the by-products of their training in femininity; they were the goals of such training" (295). As women were surrounded by images of disease, it is not surprising to find many nineteenth century women writers from Jane Austen and Mary Shelly to Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning concerned with female malady such as deliberate starvations of their heroines like Catherine in Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights or Emily Dickinson's declaration that she "has been hungry, all the Years". Thus symptoms of anorexia (loss of appetite, self-starvation), agoraphobia (fear of open and public spaces), or claustrophobia (fear of closed spaces), madness, delirium across nineteenth century British and American women writers' writings alert us to how they overcame debilitating patriarchal socialisation and "anxiety of authorship" in order to emerge as writers on their own right.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. When was *The Madwoman in the Attic* published?

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2. Discuss Gilbert and Gubar's central argument in the essay "Infection in the Sentence: the Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship".

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## *3.5 TORIL MOI: LIFE AND WORKS*

Toril Moi was born on 28th November, 1953 in Farsund, Norway. She is a critical thinker and academic who writes on feminism, literary theory, philosophy and literature. She spent her early years in South-West Norway and was educated at the University of Bergen and University of Oxford. She moved to North Carolina in 1989 and since then, has lived there. Apart from holding fellowships in several institutions across the world she has been awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Philosophy by the Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

Toril Moi is celebrated for her ground breaking book *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (1985). Her major works include *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (1994), *What Is a Woman? And Other Essays* (1999), *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* (2006) and

*Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell (2017)*. She is the editor *of The Kristeva Reader* (1986), and of *French Feminist Thought* (1987).

## *3.5 READING TORIL MOI'S 'FEMINIST, FEMALE, FEMININE'*

Toril Moi's essay 'Feminist, Female, Feminine' was first published in the Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore edited book, *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism* in the year 1989. It is, actually, an edited and shorter version of an essay originally entitled "Feminist Literary Criticism" which was published in the year 1986. In this essay, Toril Moi has clarified some of the oft misunderstood terminology in feminist criticism and sets out to define and distinguish three crucial terms of interest: female, feminine and feminist.

In simple terms: femaleness is a matter of biology, femininity is a set of culturally defined characteristics and feminist is a political position. Let us look at these terms in detail, following Moi's line of thought-

**Feminist**: Moi begins by defining feminism or feminist criticism as a movement and "political commitment to the struggle against all forms of patriarchy and sexism" (117). She draws on Kate Millet's seminal work *Sexual Politics* and argues how exposing the power relations of male dominance functions as a key objective of feminist politics. Moi mentions how feminists over the years have appropriated different critical tools from diverse theoretical positions from Marxism to Deconstruction, from Liberal Humanism to Psychoanalysis to transform the way we understand the world and its functions in power. However Moi warns against a tendency among some feminists to cast "women as eternal victims of male ploys" (119). She argues that "while it is true that many women have been victimised intellectually, emotionally and physically by men, it is also true that some have managed efficiently to counter male power" (119).

**Female**: If we agree that femaleness is a matter of biology, then we must also admit that it is clearly separate from political positions that we acquire over the

years. This is particularly true of writings which may be by women but is not necessarily feminist. If women write in conformity of the stereotypes of patriarchy of a meek submissive docile woman and an aggressive man, it is, in no way, feminist writing. Rosalind Coward has made an important point in her influential essay, "Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?" She argues, "The Mills and Boons romantic novels are all are written by, read by and marketed for, and are all about women. Yet nothing can be further from the aim of feminism than these fantasies based on sexual, racial and class submission which so frequently characterize these novels" (120). It is true that in a patriarchal society there has been a concerted attempt to silence women's experience therefore rendering it visible is an important anti-patriarchal act. However, a mere expression of women's experience may not presuppose a feminist politics.

This then clearly indicates that being female does not necessarily make one feminist or the vice versa. A man can be a feminist too provided- the values and ideologies he supports- vindicate objectives of feminist criticism. Feminist criticism has to expose the operation of patriarchal power even in the most innocuous of details such as considering women's doing of everyday household chores as natural and exposing a careful division of labour that supports male dominance.

**Feminine**: Feminist critics have usually maintained a distinction of sex and gender; male/female as biologically given and masculine/feminine as culturally and socially constructed. Thus, female is nature while feminine is a product of nurture. As Simone de Beauvoir famously said in *The Second Sex* (1949) "One is not born a woman, rather becomes one". Thus, a young girl is trained into feminine traits of meekness, docility, submissiveness and passivity as opposed to a boy who is expected to be assertive, aggressive, and active in all spheres of life. Therefore, feminists argue that a woman is a female but that does not necessarily mean that she has to be feminine in the patriarchal sense of the term.

Thus, by explaining the basic differences among the terms- 'female', 'feminine' and 'feminist'- Toril Moi carries forward the discussion which her literary foremothers like Simone de Beauvoir and Elaine Showalter began. By

lucidly explaining the inter-relation among these terms, she contributes to the repertoire of Feminist Literary Criticism.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. Name some critical works of Toril Moi.

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2. How does Toril Moi assert the difference between the three terms- 'Female', 'Feminine' and 'Feminist'? Explain

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## *3.6 GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK: LIFE AND WORKS*

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was born in Calcutta, India in 1942. She attended Presidency College and graduated in the year 1959. Then, she moved to the US to complete her MA and Ph.D. in comparative literature at Cornell University, under the supervision of Paul de Man. Her first book was based on her doctoral thesis on W.B. Yeats' poetry, a study that is quite different from her later

postcolonial research, but which adopts a critical stance of English rule in Ireland. Spivak's has been awarded with numerous academic posts, titles and honours, including the Andrew W. Mellon Professorship of English at Pittsburgh University (1987), the Avalon Foundation Professorship in the Humanities at Columbia University (1991), the Kyoto Prize in Arts and Philosophy (2012) and the third highest civilian award of India, *Padma Bhushan* (2013).

The highly theoretical approach to postcolonial studies taken by Spivak can be traced to her second major publication, her translation in 1976 of Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (originally published in French). In 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988) Spivak critiques the essentialist underpinnings of Subaltern Studies, where the marginalized subaltern subject is always defined via his or her difference from the elites. Spivak asserts that the subaltern subject is heterogeneous and, by examining the mechanisms of the supposed 'recovery' of their voice, instead an on-going displacement and effacement is revealed. She has also translated short stories by the Bengali author Mahasweta Devi and writes about her in 'A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman's Text from the Third World'. Another key essay by her, which was originally published in 1981, is 'French Feminism in an International Frame' where Spivak attacks Kristeva's portrayal of Chinese women from a Western perspective. Spivak continues to write with untiring zeal and enthusiasm.

## *3.7 READING "THREE WOMEN'S TEXTS AND A CRITIQUE OF IMPERIALISM"*

Spivak's essay begins with a path breaking statement,

> It should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English. The role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored (798).

Spivak examines three women's texts Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) to

explore the predicament of the colonial other or the native female in these texts. She argues that as the female individualist in the age of imperialism, Jane Eyre, the protagonist, comes into herself through a process of othering and annihilating her native other Bertha Mason. Bertha Mason is rendered an indeterminate space of human/animal in one of the passages that Spivak quotes.

In the deep shade, at the further end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not… tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal; but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face (*Jane Eyre* 295 quoted in Spivak 801).

While Marxist critic Terry Eagleton has read the text in terms of class mobility of Jane's governess position and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar read Bertha in psychological terms as Jane's "dark double", Spivak argues that the ideology of imperialism is at the heart of text; the disinheritance of Bertha is key to Jane's coming into being.

Jean Rhys, born in on the Caribbean island of Dominica, rewrote the novel Jane Eyre through the character of Bertha Mason as Antoinette. She not only renders Bertha more human that the indeterminate space in Bronte's novel, but also keeps Bertha's sanity intact to offer a sharp critique of imperialism. When Rochester renames Antoinette as Bertha the violence of the erasure of the identity of the colonised is marked. Rhys makes Antoinette see herself as the other as in Bronte's text. Spivak says,

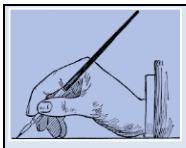
> In this fictive England, she must play her role, act out the transformation of her "self" into the fictive Other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction (804).

Moreover, Rhys is careful to treat Rochester's character with sympathy where he is seen as a victim of the patriarchal inheritance law of entailment where the father's natural preference for the firstborn and the younger son is sent to the

colonies to seek an heiress. Christophine in her creole English asks a poignant question to Rochester,

> she don't come to your beautiful house to beg you to marry with her. No, it's you come all the long way to her house – it's you beg her to marry. And she love you and she give you all she have. Now you don't love her and you break her up. What you do with her money, eh? (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, 130 quoted in Spivak 806).

Thus, Jean Rhys, through her novel Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) rewrites how the feminist individualist is secured through a process of alienating the colonised other.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. What is your idea of rewriting a classic?

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2. Have you read such rewritten texts? Try reading Aime Cesaire's play which is a reworking of Shakespeare's *Tempest* from a postcolonial perspective.

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The final text that Spivak discusses is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Spivak argues that the text does not deploy the axiomatic of imperialism, but has episodes where imperialistic ideology can be seen at work. As a text, *Frankenstein* dissolves the binary of male and female in Victor's laboratory, an artificial womb where a male can now be the maker of man replacing woman. In a didactic reading of the text, we may say that Mary Shelley punishes Victor for overreaching, for playing God. Shelly seems to reject selective social engineering where humans could be created artificially. In fact, while Victor- the aspiring God- dies struggling to contain his "monstrous creation", the creature escapes closure in the text. The monster is borne away in a raft claiming he would immolate himself, but he is "lost in darkness and distance" and the annihilation of the monster escapes the closure. Spivak says that the place of the unnameable monster is left open by an otherwise great flawed text. "It is satisfying for a postcolonial reader to consider this a noble resolution for a nineteenth-century English novel" (812). Spivak concludes by saying that an informed critique of imperialism will eventually expand the horizon of the politics of reading.

Thus, through an analysis of these three texts, Gayatri Spivak, puts forward an apt critique of Imperialism and colonialism. By pointing at the dialogue between texts, she highlights the basic nature of Postcolonial literary criticism and shows us the ways in which texts are capable of talking back to each other.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. Name some of the critical works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

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2. Discuss Spivak's main argument in her essay- 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism'.

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3. You have Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in this course. How does Spivak take this novel in her critical work?

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## *3.8 SUMMING UP*

By now you must have a clear idea of some of the major issues that concern the feminists. Feminist theory is a huge area of work and it is growing incessantly. So it would be difficult to sum up even the basic issues and critics in one book. Therefore, we hope that you would turn to reading more on this area and enrich your understanding of not only the texts prescribed in this course but other texts written by men.

## *3.9 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS*

1. Discuss how "anxiety of authorship" is different from Bloom's "anxiety of influence"?

2. Do you agree that women writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth century encountered far more rigid patriarchal socialisation than they would in the twentieth century? (Think if this is true across geographical spaces or only to Europe and North America)

3. Define and distinguish the terms feminist, female and feminine.

4. Do you think a man can be a feminist? A woman can hold strong patriarchal values? Look around yourself and discuss with reference to your experience.

5. Discuss Spivak's main argument in her essay- 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism'

6. Situate Gilbert and Gubar, Toril Moi and Spivak in the tradition of Feminist Literary Criticism and analyse their main arguments. Also, find out the similarities as well as differences of their critical thought.

## *3.10 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS*


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# MODULE II: WOMEN POETS

## *UNIT 4: ELIZABETH B. BROWNING: AURORA LEIGH (SELECTIONS) CHRISTINA ROSSETTI: "GOBLIN MARKET"*

**UNIT STRUCTURE**



## *4.0 INTRODUCTION*

This unit will introduce you to two women poets of the Victorian age and give you an idea of their works. The poets chosen are Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti and the poems chosen are selections from *Aurora Leigh* (1857) and 'Goblin Market' (1862) respectively. Before coming to the particular poets, it is necessary to cast a brief light on the issue of women writing as a part of literary studies. The need for studying women's writing as a separate genre arises with the specific problems faced by a woman writer by virtue of the gendered boundaries constructed by the male dominated world, academic or otherwise. Women's writing as a sub-genre historicizes writing by women in terms of their socio- political context and is studied with the aid of feminist theory as an analytical tool. Thus, the poems prescribed in the course have to be dealt with, in relation to socio-historical context of the Victorian society, guided by the basic trends of feminist thought.

## *4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

The main objective of this unit is to negotiate a discourse against patriarchy as expounded in the poems of two women poets. By the end of this unit, you will be able to:

• acquaint yourself with the life and works of the selected women poets, namely Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti

• read critically the select poems of these two poets

• explore and analyse the women question in terms of rights, choice and identity as reflected in the poems

## *4.2 ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING: LIFE AND WORKS*

Elizabeth Barrett was born on March 6, 1806 in Durham, England. She lived a privileged childhood with eleven siblings. Apparently, she had no health problems until 1821, when she was prescribed opium for a nervous disorder. Although Elizabeth had no formal education, she learnt Latin and Greek from the tutor of her brother. Being a voracious reader, she read all the classics and by the age of twelve, wrote an "epic" poem consisting of four books of rhyming couplets.

There are two distinct phases in Barrett's life and career, one in England and the other in Italy. *The Seraphim and Other Poems* (1838) was the first volume of Elizabeth Browning's mature poetry which appeared with her own name. *Poems* (1844) earned her popularity and inspired Robert Browning to write to her, telling her how much he loved her poems. She records their love affair in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1950) which she wrote over the next two years. Browning imitated his hero Shelley by spiriting his beloved off to Italy in August 1846 after getting married. Consequently, her father disinherited her. Unlike her brothers and sisters, Elizabeth had inherited some money of her own, so the newly-weds could live comfortably in Italy. In 1849, Elizabeth gave birth to a son. Her growing interest in the Italian struggle for independence led her to write *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851) and *Poems before Congress* (1860). 1857 saw the publication of

the verse-novel *Aurora Leigh*. She died on June 29, 1861 from possibly, an overdose of opium.

## *4.3 READING AURORA LEIGH (SELECTIONS)*

*Aurora Leigh* (1857) takes the form of a novel-poem which chronicles through blank verse in nine books the advancement of a women poet. In the view of Virginia Woolf, Barrett Browning "was inspired by a flash of true genius when she rushed into the drawing-room and said that here, where we live and work is the true place for the poet." This poetic narrative with a distinct autobiographical strain recounts the tale of a young female poet, Aurora Leigh, who lives in England with a stern aunt after the death of her Italian mother and English father. The poem is set in Florence, Malvern, London and Paris. In the first five books Aurora narrates the events from her past beginning with her childhood until the blooming age of about 27. From books six to nine, she reports events in the diary form.

The poem's main action starts at the juncture when her cousin Romney, who works as a wealthy philanthropist and social activist, proposes her for marriage in Book II. Romney denies the fact about women having either the inner potential or the social status necessary for writing significant poetry. Romney, with lack of assertion and persuasiveness, tries to lead her to join his noble cause of social work. Barrett Browning's protagonist vehemently rejects her cousin's proposal, plunges forward in her successful march as a poet, after the demise of her atrocious aunt. Book III opens in London where Aurora starts her life as an aspiring poet. Here Aurora writes for "encyclopaedias, magazines,/ And weekly papers, holding up my name/ To keep it from the mud" (III. 310-312). At this point a woman named Lady Waldemar comes in terms with Aurora and makes her realize her love for Romney, while Romney on the other hand prepares to marry Marian Earle, a poor seamstress. Ironically, in Book IV, Marian rejects Romney's proposal for their class difference causing further dismay for the latter. In Book V Aurora looks for her poetic muse in desperation and is embittered by the engagement of Lady Waldemar with Romney. Book VI begins with Aurora in

Paris where she comes across Marian's ill-fated life in a brothel. In Book VII she goes to Italy with Marian and her illegitimate son. Here, she gives us her views on art and its role in society. Art, in her manifesto, should not be a mere imitation of the world of nature; instead, true art has an infusion with the realm of the spiritual. In Book VIII Aurora meets Romney in Florence and learns about his frustrating experiences in reform works. Romney tells Aurora that he has been delighted by reading her book. He tells her "It stands above my knowledge, draws me up;/ 'Tis high to me" (VIII. 285-286). Here Romney changes his earlier notion regarding the poetic temperament of women. Romney, in apologizing to Aurora, repetitively delivers the same words Aurora spoke at the time when she had rejected his proposal for marriage. After reading her book, he now understands that "It takes a soul,/ To move a body — it takes a high-souled man,/ To move the masses" (VIII. 430-432). Aurora introduces Romney to an entirely new value system which lays stress on spiritual ideals. Romney's reference to Aurora as an angel reinforces the notion that the female poet transcends on earth as God's mouthpiece. So the female poet is depicted as an angel despite of her non conformation to the traditional Victorian role as the angel of the house in seeking professional avenues outside the private sphere. "'Ah,' he said/ 'Aurora! When the prophet beats the ass,/ The angel intercedes'" (VIII. 794-796). In Book IX after a series of incidents, including Romney's tragic loss of eyesight, the two lovers come together and culminate in marriage, after having learnt the androgynous gender roles which execute power in social life.

## *4.4 CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON THE POEM*

*Aurora Leigh* is a deep exploration in feminist analysis where Elizabeth Barrett Browning interrogates the Victorian construction of gendered behaviour which confines a woman firmly in the domain of the interior sphere by offering a public space for the poet Aurora in the male dominated public sphere. This allows a discussion in Aurora's exhibition of an inverse gender role in the text as it brings her prescribed feminine role to a point of ambivalence in terms of her historical context as a Victorian woman. The Victorian gender construction which demarcates masculine space and feminine space as occupying separate social

spheres clearly informs Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. Barrett Browning does not confine Aurora within the circumference of the threshold; she eventually renders Aurora to fall in to the norms of the socially constructed female space by delineating her as a normative female subject who is incapacitated in functioning either as a Victorian woman or an aspiring artist without the male legitimization offered by her lover Romney. Timothy Farell rightfully talks about Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi's observation that Aurora expresses a deep ambivalence about her role as a woman in the early phase of the poem. Throughout the poem, Aurora both acknowledges as well as rejects these varied shades of femininity in her character. In book 5, she discovers her hair beginning "to burn and creep,/Alive to the very ends" (5.1126-27). With reference to her wooing of Romney, she places herself in the role of Medusa in her connection with the portrait of her deceased mother. (1125). She relates herself with the pregnant Marian in insisting to act as a mother herself for the latter's illegitimate child (7.124). But paradoxically Aurora envisions Marion as a Madonna figure and simultaneously distances her through objectification. Gelpi refers as example Aurora's description of her mother where she applies the paradoxical images of "angel," "witch," "Medusa," and "Lamia" in describing her mother. There are several instances in the poem where Barrett Browning seems to depict her chief protagonist in masculine lines. As for example, Browning makes Aurora have the same surname with Romney as they were cousins, and also carves a physical resemblance between the two. Lady Waldemar writes, "Your droop of eyelid is the same as his" (IX.163). In Book I, Aurora's "belief in herself as a poet leads [her] to escape when possible from her conventional life as an English lady and see herself as a deer — but a stag, not a doe: 'I threw my hunters off and plunged myself/ Among the deep hills, as a hunted stag/ Will take the waters'. The best example of inversion of gender role in Aurora occurs when she compared herself with Achilles as she learnt the language of the classics from her father while it was Achilles' mother who disguised him in women's clothes to forbid him from going to the Trojan War. Here, the context of interchanging clothes is taken as an instance of showcasing the inter change of gender role play and this makes the comparison between Achilles and Aurora viable. In the beginning of the text, Aurora uses masculine lines of self-definition

to justify her role in the outer domain of the public sphere and remain untainted in the realm of the public space. As the story in the poem progresses, Aurora loses her inversed identity and transforms herself into a complete female subject in both action and spirit. Aurora's empathy towards Marian, when she finds her and her fatherless child in Paris, exhibits the feminine qualities of sisterhood and care. By the novel-poem's end, Aurora seems to be disillusioned in her inversed gender agency in performing masculine roles. She confesses to Romney that she was mistaken in assuming an imbalance between creativity of an artist and role of a wife when both can be done in unison for a complete effect. She eventually got submerged in the internalization of Victorian patriarchal norms for women which gendered them as the 'angel of the house' and made them moral repositories for counterbalancing the male subject's exposure to the amoral public world.

*Aurora Leigh* can also be read as a *kunstlerroman*. A *kunstlerroman* is the German term for "novel of the artist". It is a novel that examines the development of an artist typically from childhood to a point of maturity where the protagonist realizes his or her artistic potential and mission. *Kunstlerroman* typically depict the struggles of sensitive protagonists to overcome bourgeois values and other obstacles thereby realizing their creative potential. *Aurora Leigh*, a novel – length poem written in blank verse, is considered to be the first female *Kunstlerroman* as it focuses chiefly on Aurora's journey in maturing as a woman and an artist through personal and creative revelation. By charting Aurora's creative journey, Elizabeth Browning beautifully portrays Victorian ambiguities concerning rights, choice and identity, thereby familiarizing us with the lives of women of that period.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. Name a few poetry collections of Elizabeth Browning.

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2. Name a novel-poem written by Elizabeth Browning.

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3. When was *Aurora Leigh* published?

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4. What is a *kunstlerroman*? Can you call *Aurora Leigh* a *kunstlerroman*?

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## *4.5 CHRISTINA ROSSETTI: LIFE AND WORKS*

Christina Georgina Rossetti, one of the noted women poets of nineteenth-century England, was born on December 5, 1830, to Gabriele and Frances Polidori Rossetti. Being born in an intellectual family of poets, artists, and critics, she inculcated many of her father's artistic tendencies despite being closer to her mother's religious temperament. Along with her brothers Dante Gabriel and William Michael, she pursued the aesthetic ideal of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood. Although she was betrothed to a minor Pre-Raphaelite named James

Collinson in the year 1848, the engagement terminated in 1850 after he converted to Roman Catholicism.

Christina Rossetti's early writings reflect her experiment with a variety of genres giving an instance of her versatility. Being interested in theology she weaves a number of themes in the devotional paradigm. She is at her playful best in her children's compositions. Revolving around a cosmopolitan temper, her thematic engagements revolve around religious philosophy to women issues to the characteristics of Pre-Raphaelite art. Christina Rossetti began publishing her poems in magazines like *Athenaeum* and *The Germ* from 1842. She began experimenting with diverse verse forms like hymns, ballads and sonnets from 1847 onwards. Her most famous collection, *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, got published in the year 1862, when she was 31. It contains the poem 'Goblin Market' which is prescribed for our study in this course. She died from breast cancer on 29 December 1894 and was buried in Highgate Cemetery in England.

## *4.6 READING "GOBLIN MARKET"*

"Goblin Market" is a long and deceptively simple poem which explores the themes of sisterhood, seduction and female exploitation. In it, Rossetti formulates a basic conduct of behavioural norms in which a female hero — a heroine — might function. The poem begins with the goblins calling their trade cry 'Come Buy, Come Buy' to buy their fruits which entice the two sisters- Laura and Lizzie. Lizzie closes her eyes lest she gets tempted while Laura is instantly seduced by their luscious display of fruits from all seasons. Laura being mesmerized by them, initially describes them as 'little men' but later she finds in them similarities of animal body parts which eventually symbolize their dark animal instincts. After continually sucking the fruits offered to her by the goblin men in exchange for her golden lock, Laura is so bewildered that she couldn't figure out whether it's "night or day" as she progresses towards home by herself. On reaching home Lizzy reprimands Laura for visiting the Goblins and reminds her of Jeanie who was exploited by the goblins on a moonlight night owing to which the latter succumbed to an early death. Rossetti refers to them as sly

brothers organized in their crime against women. Throughout the poem Lizzie is presented as a pure woman untainted by seduction. Lizzie's difference from other virgin characters in English literature is that she actively follows temptation not to be victimized, but to conquer it. When her sister Laura seems to be entrapped, Lizzie is resolute to get her the said fruit as an ultimate attempt in desperation for saving her sister's honour and life. Lizzie boldly confronts the Goblin men who, now, refuse to sell the fruits and attacked her in return. Yet she is resilient enough to shun away temptation and keeps her mouth perpetually closed. Her resilience bears fruit and she succeeds in saving her sister. She ran home and asked Laura to "Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices / Squeezed from goblin fruits for you," explaining that "For your sake I have braved the glen / And had to do with goblin merchant men". Thus, Lizzy in her capacity as a woman performed a daring, self-sacrificing task which can be related to Christ's sacrifice of himself to protect her sister from the goblins. Since there is no exhibition of positive feminine energy involved through a direct attack it remains a passive kind of heroism. Lizzie does not physically assault the goblin men in demanding the antidote for their fruit. Neither does she cast a magical enchantment over her sister. Rather in a manner of self-persecution she offers herself as a feast to the lecherous goblins anticipating physical and sexual abuse to perform a retrogressive action.

## *4.7 CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON THE POEM*

In "Goblin Market" (1859), Christina Rossetti challenges the conventional patriarchal notion of women in Victorian society in terms of gendered norms of sexual behaviour, educational rights and the public sphere. The poem also reconstructs the Christian idea of redemption. Although, it is suffused with goblins and other supernatural elements, the feminist undertone is deliberately kept up. Laura can be compared to Eve in her eating the magical, and forbidden fruit. But here, she is no longer tempted by a serpent, rather by men, depicted as goblins, and she is in the path of destruction only to be saved at the eleventh hour by her sister in the role of a feminine Christ figure.

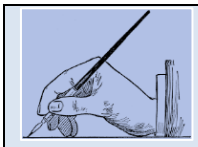
The eating of the forbidden fruit and the poet's stance towards the status of Victorian woman may be seen with an implication of ambiguity in "Goblin Market." The restrictions on Victorian woman are represented through biblical example in the poem. The fruit, which is forbidden both in the Bible as well as in the poem, is a metaphor for aggressive female sexual behaviour, feminine agency and choice. The free sexual space and choice of the female has to be curbed through moral and ethical boundaries of social conduct and religious restrictions. If sensually passionate Laura acts as Eve in expressing desire, the desexualized Lizzy acts as Virgin Mary in curbing the same. Thus, the poem weaves both the themes of desire as well as restriction which constitute an integral part of feminine concerns in the Victorian world.

Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market," may also be studied as a representative of the genre of the fairy tale besides the other thematic concerns interpolated within its subject matter. This poem served as a source to imbibe the moral value system of Victorian society in the minds of children. The source of inspiration in writing the poem for Rossetti was the tale of "The Lady of the Silver Bell" yet the poet incorporates her unique style of narrating her fairy tale element propagating the dauntless tale of Lizzy's courage and Laura's recovery amidst the conventional codes of Victorian patriarchal structure.

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

There is a tendency to homogenize patriarchy as a Judaeo-Christian ideology that concentrates on the idea of the fallen women in the poem. Rossetti's allusion to the discourse on the biblical convention of the consumption of the forbidden fruit and Fall offers light on the Woman Question in terms of choice and morality in the Victorian society. But rather than the term 'fallen' the terms 'rebellious' and 'self-willed' are more appropriate for the sisters portrayed here. There is absolutely no presence nor influence of any patriarchal figure in the final stage of the poem which creates the image of an exclusive feminine existence. The women may not be virginally pure yet they are not fallen and they have no regret for their past transgression. The confusion of moral and promiscuous behaviour in "Goblin Market" highlights Rossetti's dilemma between realizing her society's blatant disregard for the biblical

tenets of forgiveness and acceptance while herself functioning as an effective individual in the same society that makes and breaks the moral norms for all individuals in general and for its women in particular.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. Can we discuss Rossetti's Goblin Market as a fairy tale?

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## *4.8 SUMMING UP*

In this unit, we learned about the Victorian socio-cultural milieu as highlighted through the works of two women poets namely, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti. Through their poems, we became acquainted with their strategies of negotiating patriarchy and expounding the women question in terms of rights, choice and identity. Thus, this unit has prepared us to extend our learning for subsequent discussions of short stories and novels selected for this course.

## *4.9 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS*

1. Discuss Browning's *Aurora Leigh* as a Victorian social document.

2. How does *Aurora Leigh* problematize the concerns of feminism? Discuss with special reference to the titular character.

3. How does Rossetti blend in the concerns of Christian theology in the poem 'Goblin Market'? Discuss with special reference to the ideas of 'forbidden fruit' and 'fallen woman'

4. Compare and contrast the women question as projected in the two poems *Aurora Leigh* and 'Goblin Market', keeping in mind the socio-cultural milieu of the Victorian period.

## *4.10 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS*

1. Browning Elizabeth Barrett. *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems*. London: Penguin. 1995

2. Rossetti Christina. *Goblin Market and Other Poems*. Dover Publications. 1994.

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## *UNIT 5: AMY LOWELL: 'A JAPANESE WOOD-CARVING', 'A BALLAD OF FOOTMEN', 'A WINTER RIDE'.*

## *ADRIENNE RICH: 'AUNT JENNIFER'S TIGERS', 'DREAMWOOD', 'PLANETARIUM'*

**UNIT STRUCTURE**





## *5.0 INTRODUCTION*

This unit will address the women question by engaging with two women poets of critical acclaim. The poets selected are Amy Lowell and Adrienne Rich. The poems are Amy Lowell's 'A Japanese Wood-Carving', 'A Ballad of Footmen' and 'A Winter Ride' and Adrienne Rich's 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers', 'Dreamwood', 'Planetarium'. Through a detailed discussion of first, their life and works, and then, their selected poems, this unit will develop on the theory and

practice of feminist literary criticism as expounded in the initial chapters of the module.

## *5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

This unit will enable you to

• acquaint yourself with the life and works of the selected women poets, namely Adrianne Rich and Amy Lowell

• read critically their selected poems

• explore and analyse the women question in terms of rights, choice and identity as reflected in the poems

## *5.2 AMY LOWELL: LIFE AND WORKS*

Amy Lowell (1874-1925) was born in Brookline, Massachusetts to Augustus Lowell and Katherine Bigelow Lawrence. She received her first education at the family home by an English governess. Later on, she went to private schools in Brookline and Boston. Her first poem was written at the age of nine. She maintained a travel journal during her extensive family vacations. Accounts of her early travelogues were reproduced as stories and were printed in *Dream Drops* or *Stories from Fairyland* (1887).

Amy Lowell's first book of poetry is *A Dome of Many-Coloured Glass* (1912). Her volume of poems entitled *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (1914), reflecting her 'Amygism' as a new kind of imagism which was composed in free verse and polyphonic prose received much accolades. Her first book of criticism, *Six French Poets* (1915), based on a series of her lectures, was also well received. *Men, Women and Ghosts* (1916) was another of her well received collections and contained her highly praised poem 'Patterns'. Here a woman in the eighteenth-century walks in her garden and contemplates a nightmarish future where her fiancé dies in a battle, yet she has to maintain the patterned role of chastity. In 1917 she published another critical volume, *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, which consisted of essays on six contemporary poets: Edwin Arlington

Robinson, Robert Frost, Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg, H.D., and John Gould Fletcher. Lowell also published anthologies of imagist poets in 1915, 1916, and 1917. Her next volume of poetry, *Can Grande's Castle* (1918), included four long poems. The title was taken from the name of the refuge where Dante, the Florentine exile, wrote portions of his Divine Comedy. *Pictures of a Floating World* (1919) is a translation of the Japanese word *ukiyo-e*, which represents her long time interest towards the art of the Orient. The prescribed poem 'Japanese Wood Carving' is a reflection of this oriental interest. Her posthumous publication *What's O'Clock* containing the famous poems, 'Lilacs', 'East Wind' and 'Ballads for Sale' won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1926. The modernist poet T. S. Eliot defined Lowell as a "demon saleswoman of poetry". She was one of the finest American poets who wrote in the Imagist style, yet also experimenting with it to carve a niche for her own. She died of cerebral haemorrhage in the year 1925.

## *5.3 READING THE POEMS*

### 5.3.1 'A JAPANESE WOOD-CARVING'

The poem 'Japanese Wood Carving' is a wonderful reflection of Amy Lowell's engagement with oriental interest. The poem encapsulates a communion between the poet and the artist in recapturing the scenery in Japan which can be interpreted as a conglomeration of the postcolonial idea of the orient and the occident in the thematic development of the poem. The poem begins with an oriental note of describing a particular Japanese wood piece which hangs on a door. The picture in the carving is that of an eastern forest which once again confirms the oriental tendency in the theme. The wood carving bears testimony to the changing seasons- spring, summer, autumn and winter. The changing mental imagery of the women poet finds an eco-feminist reflection in drawing a parallel with the possible change of seasons indicated by the Japanese wood carving. The difference between the two worlds- West, where the poet inhabits and East, which the carving mimetically represents- is clearly distinct. The trees in the carving have no resemblance to pine or birch but bear the salt of the sea. The flashing waves are sharply carved in the piece with two birds relishing the fruit of life in

sea. They indulge in sea sports, diving in the water, looking for fish, gliding and skimming and enjoying a complete moment of wanton happiness. The poet sitting by the fire in her room can only look up at the Japanese wood carving and is transported to the eastern shores in her contemplation. Thus, the poem draws a nexus between the western and eastern world through a piece of art which in turn is translated into a poem. The imagery of the sea is beautifully captured in the poem in resonance with its carving in the wood piece. There is an eco-feminist approach in associating the poet's inner workings of the mind with a scene of nature.

### 5.3.2 'A Ballad of Footmen'

Amy Lowell's 'A Ballad of Footmen' is a reflection on the meaninglessness of war. Here, she metaphorically represents the artillery used in war as some useless toy used for mindless killing. The poet significantly mentions that all the soldiers, who are men, get involved in this needless activity while all women, irrespective of which nation they belong indulge in perennial shedding of tears at the destruction caused by war. The poet is sarcastic about the diplomacy and power of kings and the bureaucrats which give rise to wars merely for the throne. The poet mourns the plight of the footmen or soldiers who have to lay down lives unquestionably at a single command of the Emperor or whoever leads the army. The fury of the Emperor leads these muscular men to fight with their brethren like beasts. The end of the poem ironically hints at the death knell of the civilization because of these heinous wars fought by men at the command of a few. Perhaps the poem is a direct reference to the atrocities of the World War l, specifically the holocaust, which has done an irreparable damage to the human civilization. In the entire miasma of despair caused by war, the women played the role of passive onlookers rather than active agents like the footmen. This unites them together in the solidarity of ceaseless tears for the death of their dead ones. There is a tendency of feminizing sorrow in contrast to the rugged masculine nature of warfare in the poem. But overall, the poem's focus is on humanity itself, which has threatened its own existence by waging numerous wars. She concludes the poem on a note of sorrow by observing that we have already killed the civilization

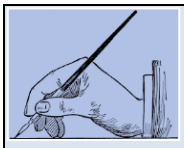
for which we relentlessly worked- 'Take the dust of the streets and sprinkle your head, The civilization we've worked for is dead'.

### 5.3.3 'A Winter Ride'

Amy Lowell's 'A Winter Ride' is a beautiful short poem with abundant imagery derived from nature. In an overtly eco feminist tone, 'A Winter Ride' talks about complete feminine jouissance in the lap of nature. The poet derives celestial pleasure in enjoying a horse ride in the snow-covered white roads. She contemplates a moment of union with the earth in her abundant joy in riding through the vales and fields in the soothing sunlight of wintry days. The feminine subjectivity of the poet is revitalized in ecstasy and she seems to be immortalized in those moments of joy during her winter ride. This is evident in the line- 'Joy in the touch of the wind and sunlight! Joy! With the vigorous earth I am one.' Moreover, the word 'ride' is impregnated with sensual overtone as it reaffirms the consummation of the feminine self with nature. Again, if we consider the poetic persona as a female which seeks consummation ('ride') with the feminine self of nature, we can find out unmistakable strands of homosexual love and union in the poem. It is also important to note that Amy Lowell had a romantic relationship with Ada Dwyer Russell and many of her poems bear testimony to this. Thus, this 12-line poem is a unique and undeniable expression of a female poet's subjective identity through the lens of nature.

## *5.4 CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON THE POEMS*

The three poems that we have read and understood just now are reflections of Amy Lowell's philosophy of life. Her involvement in the Imagist movement can be seen in the abundant imagery used in all the three poems. Moreover, her disillusionment with war and the advocacy of a return to nature can be felt in the poems. Such a return to nature is projected through an eco-feminist tone. Finally, her lifelong relationship with Ada Dwyer Russell finds subtle expression in her work.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. Name a few critical works of Amy Lowell.

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2. Name a few poetry collections of Amy Lowell.

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3. Which major poetic movement had a considerable influence on Amy Lowell?

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4. How is Amy Lowell's poetic philosophy reflected in her works? Discuss in light of her poems selected for your study.

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## *5.5 ADRIENNE RICH: LIFE AND WORKS*

Adrienne Rich was born in Baltimore, Maryland on May 16th, 1929. She went to Radcliffe College and graduated in 1951. She was selected by W.H.

Auden for the Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize for her first publication, *A Change of World*. In 1953, she married a Harvard University economist named Alfred H. Conrad. In 1955, she published her second volume of poetry, *The Diamond Cutters*. All throughout the 1960s she penned quite a number of collections, which included *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963) and *Leaflets* (1969) imbibing a prophetic tone of the bitterness that evolved from the feminist movement during1960s. It was in 1973, in the midst of the feminist and civil rights movements, the Vietnam War, and her own personal crisis after her husband's suicide that Rich wrote *Diving into the Wreck*, a compilation of exploratory and often aggressive poems, which won her the prestigious National Book Award in 1974. Rich received the award on behalf of all fellow women and shared it with the other nominees, Alice Walker and Audre Lorde. After that there was no looking back for Rich. She has written and published a number of poetry collections, namely *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978), *The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New 1950-1984* (1984), *Time's Power: Poems 1985-1988* (1989), *An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems 1988-1991* (1991), *Collected Early Poems: 1950-1970* (1993), *Dark Fields of the Republic: Poems 1991-1995* (1995), *Midnight Salvage: Poems 1995-1998* (1999), *Poems 1998-2000* (2001), *The School Among the Ruins: Poems 2000-2004* (2004), which earned her the Book Critics Circle Award, *Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth: Poems 2004–2006* (2006), *Tonight No Poetry Will Serve: Poems 2007-2010* (2010). Rich also authored several books embodying her critical thought, including *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1986), *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (1993) and *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations* (2001) which are considered a valuable source of informative feminist ideologue in current times. She received many awards for her outstanding contribution to poetry and died on March 27, 2012 at the age of 82.

## *5.6 READING THE POEMS*

### 5.5.1 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers'

The poem symbolically presents the drudgery of marital chores for a woman dominated by her husband in a patriarchal society. Aunt Jennifer represents a common housewife who lives in complete subordination to her husband with very less or no freedom. As a conventional feminine attribute Aunt Jennifer is excellent in handiwork and other household chores and the tigers in wool are an exquisite creation of her skill. The speaking persona narrates the details of Aunt Jennifer's needlework tapestry, which creates the image of beautiful and bright tigers in the action of prancing. These imaginary tigers seem to be very strong and fearless and unlike weak women confined in the slavery of marriage, they have no fear for the ruling men. Although they are represented artistically on a screen, yet the tigers appear lifelike to the readers. These tigers are dauntless creatures of the forest bright in their colour and activity, as they walk on earth with dignity and bravery, unlike the women bonded in wifehood whose voices are silenced by duty and propriety. Rich's vivid imagery is indeed colourful. The tigers are personified here in their commanding style of pacing in the forest in a stately and chivalric manner like the patriarchs of a male dominated world.

Aunt Jennifer, being doubly bonded, first as a dutiful wife and second for being a woman, is not so free to execute strength and power like the tigers. The speaker talks metaphorically about the weight of the wedding band that Aunt Jennifer carried in her hand. This is an implication of her bondage that was detrimental to the expression of her individuality. The servitude that she bore during her lifetime as a wife even continued till her death as she had to keep on wearing her marriage ring which bonded her to a life of domination. Even after Aunt Jennifer's death, as the poem says, her hands will still be "terrified." This is an example of synecdoche, where Rich is using Aunt Jennifer's hands to represent the whole of Aunt Jennifer's terrified self. Yet it is through her art in whatever meagre form may it be that she, according to the poet, would gain immortality. The tigers will still stand as a masterpiece of her needlework.

Aunt Jennifer's struggles are both due to her strained relationship with her husband, and also because of the lack of power for women in the patriarchal

society in which she lives. Thus, this poem, written in a very simple diction, highlights an entire pattern of male domination and exploitation over women. The prancing strong tigers in handiwork are a means of exhibiting subversive resistance through art and the immortality of the embroidered tigers are an indication of the eternal possibility of such subversion amidst all kinds of odds.

### 5.5.2 'Dreamwood'

The poem "Dreamwood" by Adrienne Rich compares the imaginative faculty of a poet's mind with that of childhood impulsiveness and creativity. Apparently, the poem is about a woman looking at a typing stand and envisioning all the possibilities and choices of her life. The cheap wooden stand acts as a dream map for her where she can envision the poetry of her later life while typing out her last report for the day. However, on a deeper level, the poet adds in the fact that only a child can see the landscape on the typing stand. It is because children are generally much more creative and imaginative than adults. When Rich uses that phrase, she seems to pose the thought that when we are young we can see all the possibilities, "distances blued and purpled by romance," and "possible watering-holes" that life presents to us because we have an open mind to those ideas. Poets, being visionaries, can take a simple subject matter that may not seem so wonderful or interesting and can represent it through their mimetic potential with a novel vision for the reader. Therefore, Rich seems to be showing the ability that poets have in the way that this woman character sees an entire map of her life in a "cheap, mass-produced wooden stand." This shows the keen ability that poets have in changing the way that readers view the world and the things in it.

Adrienne Rich seems to touch upon an idea in structuralism of juxtaposing two binaries with the line "she thinks, the material and the dream can join and that is the poem and that is the late report." Instead of simply agreeing that the material which the poem is written about is the only factor that exists in the world and that writing as well as reading is impossible because it is simply projecting structure, Rich seems to want to connect the two opposites together. With that one

small line in her poem, she suggests that some structure and bare elements solely exist, which would be the "material," but there is also the sense of the "dream" where the imagination and creation comes in and helps in adding new perspectives and ideas onto the bare material. This exquisite combination of two binary opposites- the material reality and the dream- seems to be what Adrienne Rich defines as poetry: a structure like a wooden stand that an imagination and creator builds upon because she perceives it in a certain exciting way.

The poem 'Planetarium', by Adrienne Rich is ostensibly about a 19th century female astronomer named Caroline Herschel (1750—1848) who performed her research work in coordination with her brother William, "but whose name remained obscure" while "his did not". The beginning of the poem demonstrates Herschel's life and "her 98 years to discover/8 comets" to expose the male dominated society's prejudice against female achievement, but the revelation towards the closure of the verse appears to be a collective discovery for females.

At the beginning of her poem we see, "A woman in the shape of a monster/a monster in the shape of a woman/the skies are full of them" (1-3), Rich attempts at drawing a parallel between women and stars but the word "monster" invokes a meaning that is integral to the thematic understanding of the poem. In her non-fictional prose, Rich expresses her doubts and frustration about the disintegration between the creative world of individual talent and the world of familial relation. She writes, "If there were doubts, if there were periods of null depression or active despairing, these could only mean that I was ungrateful, insatiable, perhaps a monster" (1093). Perhaps she calls a woman, with a deep passionate drive unable to tame her sensibilities according to genteel codes of womanly behaviour, as a monster. When a woman is not a coy wife, she is seen as a monster and the night sky with the astronomical images of woman as monsters is abundant. Rich also narrates the physiology of stars which are compared to female figures as she writes, "every impulse of light exploding/from the core/as life flies out of us" (21-23). The poem itself is an explosion of creativity just like the stars are an explosion of light. When the poem concludes, the form of light

transforms into a plethora of words which becomes significant in the lines, "I am a galactic cloud so deep  so invo-/luted that a light wave could take 15/years to travel through me…" (39-41). The profusion of words is the nebulous cloud and the poet herself is the mimetic representation of the cloud. However, the process of being formed into a cloud might take fifteen years "And has/taken" (41-42) fifteen years. When she says, "…I am an instrument in the shape/of a woman trying to translate pulsations/into images…" (42-44) Rich plays the dual role of being the monster in the sky and the functional element on earth who takes the responsibility of reasoning out individuality for woman in the intellectual realm. Finally, at the end of the poem, she discloses that the monstrous woman figure in the poem and the woman who composes the poem is the same person thereby drawing a conjunction between the narrative voice of the poet and the persona depicted in the poem.

Thus, the poem "Planetarium" encapsulates a radical voice of change from the traditional stereotypical constructions of a women's identity as bonded to family to the self-assured tone of being an independent, creative and scientific individual.  The poem also depicts the formation of a female struggle that reveals a continuum amidst all cultures and generations of women across the globe.  The lines "What we see, we see / and seeing is changing," captures the moment when the women comprehend the injustice meted out to them through ages and they come out of their disillusionment to raise their voices and protest against patriarchy.

## *5.6 CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON THE POEMS*

Adrianne Rich's poetry can be read as a feminist testament that highlights the conditions of the marginalized sections whose voices are often silenced and denied. She also focuses on the 1990s gay rights movement; her later poems express discontent against sexism and victimization of humanity in general. "I write as woman, lesbian and feminist," she told *The Washington Post* in 1981. "I make no claim to be universal, neuter or androgynous." The first poem prescribed for this unit, titled 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers' portrays a woman struggling to raise a

voice against domestic subordination. She is inextricably bound to the duties of a marital life, yet she tries to find out ways and means to escape that. Though not in her lifetime, the embroidery of prancing tigers that she makes allow her an opportunity of subversive resistance to patriarchy. The second poem, 'Dreamwood' is the portrait of a female visionary who, with childlike imagination, visualizes a better life and world around her. Finally, the third poem, 'Planetarium' is the picture of a radically independent feminist intellectual. By invoking the less known female astronomer Caroline Herschel, she projects the immense capabilities of women across the globe who have often been either silenced or subdued by patriarchal authority and highlights the possibility of rising against all odds, thereby carving a niche for themselves.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. Name a few poetry collections of Adrienne Rich.

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2. Name a few critical works of Adrienne Rich.

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3. Discuss Rich's 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers' as a feminist document of subversive resistance.

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4. Discuss Rich's 'Dreamwood' as the portrait of a female visionary

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5. Discuss Rich's 'Planetarium' as an exposition on the politics of identity.

## *5.7 SUMMING UP*

In this unit, we read a few selected poems from two women poets, namely- Amy Lowell and Adrienne Rich. This has enabled us to understand their poetic philosophy and situate them in the broader canon of literature written by women across the globe. Their engagement with the women question, concerning issues of rights, choice and identity makes them intriguing for us and consequently, significant inclusions of this course.

## *5.8 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS*

1. How is Amy Lowell's poetic philosophy reflected in her works? Discuss in light of her poems selected for your study.

2. Discuss the poetic philosophy of Adrienne Rich as reflected in the poems selected for your study.

3. Compare and contrast the poetry of Amy Lowell and Adrienne Rich, taking into consideration the poems selected for your study.

## *5.9 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS*

1. Lowell, Amy. *The Complete Poetical Works of Amy Lowell*. Edited by Louis Untermeyer. Houghton Mifflin. 1955.

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# MODULE III: WOMEN SHORT STORY WRITERS

## *UNIT 6: CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN: 'THE YELLOW WALLPAPER'*

**UNIT STRUCTURE**



## *6.0 INTRODUCTION*

This unit will introduce you to one of the major feminist writers of short fiction, namely, Charlotte Perkins Gilman. You will first come to know about her life and works and then, read a particular story written by her. The story selected for this study is 'The Yellow Wallpaper'. It will help you to understand the subjective nature of women's experiences expressed through the medium of the short story.

## *6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

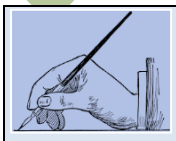
This unit aims to familiarize you with short fiction written by a major feminist writer, Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The story selected for this study is 'The Yellow Wallpaper'. At the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- acquaint yourself with the life and works of the selected woman writer
- read critically the selected text
- analyse the major thematic concerns of the selected text

## *6.2 CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN: LIFE AND WORKS*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) was born in Hartford, Connecticut. Her father, the writer Frederick Beecher Perkins, abandoned their family when she was only an infant. So, she was left in the company of relatives, two of them being Harriet Beecher Stowe, the writer, and Isabella Beecher Hooker, the feminist activist. These women instilled in Gilman the ideas of equality and independence which formed the basis for her political activities in later life. Her first marriage to struggling artist Charles Walter Stetson was quite unhappy. After her first child was born, she suffered from a traumatic condition of depression. The experiences during this period and the 'rest cure' she underwent under the supervision of Dr. Weir Mitchell, forms the basis of 'The Yellow Wallpaper'. Apart from this story, Gilman has written a number of works relating to her political and social activism, *Women and Economics* (1898) being one of the most important works. After her stint with the rest cure, Gilman's condition only deteriorated and eventually she separated from her husband and moved to California. In 1900, she married again, this time happily to her cousin George Houghton Gilman. She remained politically active until she took her life in 1935, having fought unsuccessfully with breast cancer. Apart from three poetry collections, Gilman published 186 short stories in her lifetime. Some of her best known works are the novel *Herland* (1915), the critical piece *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution (1898),* the autobiography *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography*, etc.





**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. Name a critical work written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

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2. Name a novel written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

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**3.** Name Charlotte Perkins Gilman's autobiography.

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## *6.3 READING GILMAN'S SHORT STORY 'THE YELLOW WALLPAPER'*

M.H. Abrams in his *A Handbook of Literary Terms* defines a short story as 'a brief work of prose fiction' which 'organizes the action, thought, and dialogue of its characters into the artful pattern of a plot, directed toward particular effects on an audience'(282). This definition of a short story tells us that like a novel, a short story also has an organized plot, characters and themes. The effect that the writer desires to have on the readers is decided by the way the themes are presented through the action. R.J. Rees in his book, *English Literature: An Introduction for Foreign Readers*, has reproduced H.G. Wells' definition of a short story. It goes on like this:

A short story is, or should be, a simple thing; it aims at producing one single vivid effect; it has to seize the attention at the outset, and never relaxing, gather it more and more until the climax is reached. The limit of the human capacity to attend closely therefore set a limit to it: it must explode and finish before interruption occurs or fatigue sets in. (Rees, 203)

Given the fact that there is a norm of writing a short story, we hardly find women writers following that norm completely, precisely because they have been set by male writers of stories. In most women writers we find a conscious defying of rules and we find them writing in a style or language of their own. In this unit, we shall look into Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story 'The Yellow Wallpaper' to

understand the subjective nature of women's experiences expressed through the medium of the short story.

Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' is the story of a woman confined in an upstairs room, in a hereditary estate, a story which Gilman herself calls 'a description of a case of nervous breakdown'. It is an account of a woman suffering from a severe postpartum psychosis – a traumatic condition that many women suffer after childbirth. The woman herself is the narrator of the story. Her husband, John, is a physician who is treating her with the 'rest cure' that Gilman herself was treated with. Even though the work seems to be autobiographical, it could be the story of any woman, especially a woman in the nineteenth century. As we read the story, we realize that the woman has no name, though the other characters do have names. It is a striking story of female confinement and a woman's desire to escape it. We shall see how the woman relates with her husband, the society in general and with her external self. We shall also look into how the woman confronts her inner self as opposed to her social self.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. What is a short story? Is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' a short story? Is it different? Give reasons for your answer.

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## *6.4 CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON THE STORY*

When we read 'The Yellow Wallpaper', the first thing that strikes us is the house in which the woman will be confined for three weeks. She describes it as a 'colonial mansion, a hereditary estate'. Let us see if this description means anything. Colonial signifies a time period as well as an ideology. The things associated with this word are domination, injustice, bondage, mastery, power and so on. As soon as Gilman chooses this word to describe the house, we are foretold of what it has in store for our narrator who is a wife. Undoubtedly, she is about to experience domination from a patriarch, and physical as well as psychological bondage. Similarly, the expression hereditary estate in the nineteenth century implied male inheritance. The scene is thus set for what is to follow – an eerie story of female imprisonment in an estate haunted by patriarchs of a male-dominated society. With the entry of the husband into the scene, we see juxtaposition – the woman with 'romantic felicity' of imagination against a man who is 'practical in the extreme'. He 'scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures'. Added to that is the fact that he is a physician, a man who cannot be but scientific. As the story unravels, however, the myth is broken and we see him as a patronizing, patriarch who treats his wife as a doll to be handled with care. He calls her 'little girl' and 'a blessed little goose' which show his attitude towards her. She is not to be treated as an equal but as a frail, dependent creature that hardly is given credit of having a mind of her own. He seems to relish his wife's dependence on him socially, economically and physically. Indeed, she is not to be allowed to indulge in any kind of intellectual activity. The wife on the other hand, believes that he is the reason why she is never well. But of course she can never say that in public. It would be scandalous. Although she pretends to be the obedient comely wife before her husband, she becomes a rebel when alone. In her diary, she writes: 'John is a physician, and perhaps – (I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and

a great relief to my mind) – perhaps that is one reason I do not get well faster.' It is writing on that dead paper that will make her well, says the narrator. But her husband will not allow any kind of exertion. Now let us question ourselves. Is this husband wife relationship one of its kind? Or do we find parallels in the 19th century society? Gilman in her *Women and Economics*, while discussing the state of woman in the 19th century has stated that 'in her rudimentary position woman was denied the physical freedom which underlies all knowledge, she was denied the mental freedom which is the path to further wisdom, she was denied the moral freedom of being mistress of her own action…'. It was sheer denial which marked the lives of women of that period and Gilman herself had been a victim during her first marriage. She was neither given the freedom to exercise her mind nor to make decisions. In such a context, even the narrator's nervous condition acquires significance. Hysteria was thought to be a woman's disease. Throughout the nineteenth century this mental illness was thought to be caused by the female reproductive system. Indeed, such psychological diseases as hysteria, anorexia, agoraphobia were must in patriarchal definitions of femininity. It seems that nineteenth century culture even urged women to act in a way that made them ill. Swooning, breaking down, and constantly 'considering their nerves' were laudable and natural. It is not surprising then that John almost feels proud in speaking about his 'slightly hysterical' wife with friends and relatives. Gilbert and Gubar say that this tendency to treat women as sickly beings was the result of the fear of the intellectual woman. This explains John's fear of his wife's desire to write. The narrator thus remains frustrated, her desires repressed and her body and mind imprisoned.

In such a situation our narrator reaches out to her outer world to nourish her imagination. In her response to her environment, we again find a crucial difference with her husband. For john, the house is just a house that they take up on rent for the vacation, or for his wife's rest cure. He has no emotions attached to it. For the narrator, on the other hand, the house presents a myriad of emotions. She fears the house at first then is intrigued by it and finally comes to love the house. In this we see a woman's response to her environment. Her senses work in

her responses – 'The most beautiful place…there is a delicious little garden…there is something strange about the house – I can feel it…'.In all these statements that the narrator makes about the house, we can see her feelings at work and that is something noteworthy. However, most important of all is the narrator's response to the wallpaper in her upstairs room – the yellow wallpaper. In the beginning, the wallpaper is one of the instruments of repression, confinement and imprisonment. Eventually, it becomes her solace and means of escape into an entirely different world. The room itself with barred windows, rings and things is ideal for confinement. The wallpaper moreover represents the patriarchal society in which the narrator is trapped. By moonlight, the wallpaper 'becomes bars!...and the woman behind it is as plain as can be'. Again she says 'but in places where it isn't faded and where the sun is just so – I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design'.

Now let us think about it. Could this figure be the narrator's? Will she be able to identify with this figure? Let us see for ourselves. Even though the narrator is repulsed by the paper in the beginning, gradually she gets interested by it. She finds it expressive and watching the wallpaper soon becomes one of her favourite pastimes. She becomes fond of the room "in spite of the wallpaper. Perhaps because of the wallpaper". And the woman becomes a mirror image of herself. In fact, as we read the story further, we find the narrator associating herself with the woman inside the wallpaper. She imagines her as subdued during the day. This shows us that the narrator has started identifying with the woman. She is so preoccupied with the woman behind the bars that she has developed insomnia – she hardly sleeps at night. When the narrator admits it before the readers, it is her way of criticizing her husband's smugness about her mental condition. Gradually, the single woman becomes many women and she can feel the woman crawling all over the wallpaper. Her desire to be out in the open leads to her imagining the woman out in the daylight. Gilman makes a subtle comment on the do's and don'ts of women in her society when she makes our narrator say 'for she is always creeping, and most women do not creep by daylight…it must be very humiliating

to be caught creeping by daylight'. She finally ends up wishing to free this woman and this is where the narrator and the woman become one. The narrator's wish to be free culminates in her wish to free the woman and we see at the end the narrator herself creeping all over the wall. The finality with which the narrator does this, makes us shudder as if something dreadful has happened. But the fact remains that the narrator symbolically has attained freedom.

It would be an incomplete analysis of the story if we did not look at the narrator's relationship with the other women in the story. We do not see much of Jennie and Jane and yet they present remarkable foils to the protagonist. Jennie is the narrator's nurse and Jane is John's sister. In different ways, they represent the conventional woman which the narrator is not. Jane is the epitome of womanhood – a good housekeeper and very content with her work. As the narrator tells us, 'she is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession. I verily believe she thinks it is the writing which made me sick!' now, we need to remember that the act of writing was believed to be a man's work. Gilbert and Gubar have shown in their work how women suffered from the 'anxiety of authorship'. They hold that a woman 'suffers from a radical fear that because she cannot create, that because she cannot become a precursor, "the act of writing" will isolate or destroy her'. She has been instilled with the fear that writing or creating is improper for a woman. This is why, perhaps, the narrator in the story writes on the sly, while all the time believing that writing will cure her. The other woman is Jennie the nurse. She is a professional woman and yet, ironically, it is one of the very few professions allowed to a woman in the nineteenth century. A woman was accepted as a governess or a nurse, professions which banked on the conventional picture of a woman as loving, caring and generous. These two women represent what women were accepted to be in Gilman's society. Seen in contrast to these two women, the narrator seems to us a rebel. Therefore, for the status quo to be preserved, she is to be confined in an upstairs room with barred windows. The other two women, on the other hand, are allowed to move about freely, provided they obey the man in the house and those in the society.

Any discussion of a work of fiction would be incomplete without speaking about the narrative strategy employed by the writer. The first thing we notice is the reliability or unreliability of the narrator who is the protagonist too. So the story is told in the first person and presents a limited point of view. We see the story from the perspective of the protagonist who presents the other characters ironically. In fact, irony forms an integral part of the narrative strategy. Now to understand the irony underlying the narration, you need to know what irony is. Verbal irony is 'a statement in which the meaning that a speaker implies differs sharply from the meaning that is outwardly expressed' (Abrams). When a statement explicitly expresses one attitude or evaluation but indicates that the speaker intends a very different or even opposite attitude or evaluation, it is called an ironic statement. In Gilman's story, however, we have much more than an ironic statement: the story exhibits structural irony. The entire narrative relies on ironic undertone. The device that Gilman employs to achieve this is the fallible narrator – a narrator who is the main character in the story. The narrator's presentation of the other characters and the entire situation fulfils her personal motive of challenging her husband and the patriarchal system as a whole. Therefore, we see the story as the narrator wants us to see it. For example, when she speaks about her husband's love and care for her, it is as if to mock at him:

He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction. I have a scheduled prescription for each hour in the day; he takes all care from me and I feel so ungrateful not to value it more

This in itself sounds quite innocent. The sentence, however, placed as it is tells us a lot about their relationship – he, the master and she the humble and obedient wife. It is the structure itself which creates irony. In another part of the story, the narrator speaks about her own indisposition. We know that she is an intelligent and imaginative woman but she presents herself as a delicate, sick woman:

But he said I wasn't able to go, nor able to stand it after I got there: and I did not make out a very good case for myself, for I was crying before I had

finished. It is getting to be a great effort for me to think straight. Just this nervous weakness, I suppose.

These and many other instances tell us of Gilman's narrative strategy. Irony pervades the entire story. At the end of the story it is the most glaring: 'now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!' Now this is the most subtle of ironic situations in the story. The narrative has now come full circle with the situation inverted. The strong, practical patriarch lies on the ground in a swoon while the woman is freed of her shackles. Swooning or fainting with nervousness which was a feminine felicity is now the characteristic of a man and the feminist critic of the patriarchal world has been proven victorious. Provided the fact that the narrator has told the story from a limited point of view, the irony in the structure allows us to see beyond the narrator's biased presentation and make an objective assessment of the other characters in the story.

## *6.5 SUMMING UP*

When you read Gilman's story, you have to focus on these issues that we have already discussed. However, you also have to remember that these are only the basic ways of reading a work of fiction. As a text presents multiple ways of reading, we can interpret the story in other ways as well. Here, we have done a feminist reading of the text keeping in mind what Gilbert and Gubar have to say on nineteenth century women writers. It could be read also from the psycho-analytical point of view or from the perspective of eco-criticism, focusing on the narrator's relation with her environment or on her psychological condition. But whatever be our critical lens of investigation, we can be rest assured that our study will enrich our understanding of the subjective nature of women's experiences expressed through the medium of the short story.

## *6.6 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS*

1. The narrator is the main character in the story. To what extent does this influence what you are told in the story? Can you describe the narrator?

Do you think she is reliable?

2. Describe the narrator's relationship with her husband, John. How does he treat her? What is he like?

3. Describe the narrator's relationship with other women characters of the story.

4. Is what way is the yellow wallpaper symbolic in this story? Do you see any other symbols in the story?

5. Near the end of the story, the narrator says, "I've got out at last." Has she? Explain. Does the narrator change as the story progresses?

## *6.7 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS*


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4. Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Yellow Wall-Paper, Herland, and Selected Writings. (Penguin Classics)*. New York. Penguin. 2009.

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## *UNIT 7: KATHERINE MANSFIELD: 'THE DOLL'S HOUSE'*

## *AMA ATA AIDOO: 'SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT ON THE WAY TO THE FUNERAL'*

**UNIT STRUCTURE**



## *7.0 INTRODUCTION*

This unit can be read as a continuation of the previous unit. After acquainting you with a short story written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in the previous unit, this unit will introduce the works of Katherine Mansfield and Ama Ata Aidoo. The stories selected for this study are- Katherine Mansfield's 'The Doll's House' and Ama Ata Aidoo's 'Something to talk about on the Way to the Funeral'. Reading them would enable you to understand the subjective nature of women experiences captured through the medium of short stories.

## *7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

This unit will enable you to-

- acquaint yourself with the life and works of two women short-story writers- Katherine Mansfield and Ama Ata Aidoo
- read critically the selected stories
- analyse the major thematic concerns of the short stories

## *7.2 KATHERINE MANSFIELD: LIFE AND WORKS*

Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923) was born in Wellington, New Zealand to wealthy parents, Harold Beauchamp and Annie Beauchamp. She studied at Queen's college, London and then made England her permanent home for the rest of her life. She led a bohemian life in England. As a child she had enjoyed solitary occupations, particularly writing, music and playing with dolls, but in her youth she enjoyed the company of both men and women. When her first fiancé's family rejected her, she married a recent acquaintance, but the marriage did not work and soon she divorced her husband. In all her troubles she had a constant friend in her college mate, Ida Constance Baker, who remained a friend until Mansfield's death. In 1912, she started a relationship John Middleton Murray whom she married in 1918.

As a writer of short stories, she is often compared with Chekhov, the Russian short story writer. She has published many works of fiction and her works are widely praised. She was deeply influenced by her friendships with Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence. She suffered from Tuberculosis and died at the age of 34 in the year 1923 in Fontainebleau, France. Her stories and poems have been collected into a number of volumes, some of them being *In a German Pension* (1911), *Bliss and Other Stories* (1920), *The Garden Party and Other Stories* (1922), *The Doves' Nest and Other Stories* (1922), *The Montana Stories* (1923), *Poems* (1923) and *Something Childish* (1924). Some of her well-known stories are 'A Cup of Tea', 'The Garden Party', 'The Fly', 'The Doll's House', 'The Canary', 'Prelude' and 'Bliss'.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1.Name a few short story collections of Katherine Mansfield.

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2. Name a few short stories written by Katherine Mansfield.

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## *7.3 READING 'THE DOLL'S HOUSE'*

'The Doll's House' is a Modernist story that showcases some of the dominant concerns of the early 20th century writers. It talks of class structures, gender structures and power structures within a largely patriarchal English society. It is the story of 'our Elsie', the daughter of a washerwoman; of Kezia, the younger of the Burnells, and Aunt Beryl, Kezia's aunt. The common thing among them is their gender, of course, but more importantly, is the fact that they are marginalized in different ways. Marginalization then is one of Mansfield's major concerns in this story. The most important thing in the story is the doll's house and the little lamp inside it.

There stood the doll's house, a dark, oily, spinach green, picked out with bright yellow. Its two solid little chimneys, glued on to the roof, were painted red and white, and the door, gleaming with yellow varnish, was like a little slab of toffee. Four windows, real windows, were divided into panes by a broad streak of green. There was actually a tiny porch, too, painted yellow, with big lumps of congealed paint hanging along the edge.

> But perfect, perfect little house! Who could possibly mind the smell? It was part of the joy, part of the newness.

The Burnell girls have received the doll's house as a gift from Mrs. Hay. The girls are totally excited at the prospect of showing off the house to their friends. 'The Burnell children could hardly walk to school fast enough the next morning. They burned to tell everybody, to describe, to—well—to boast about their doll's house before the school bell rang'. "I'm to tell," said Isabel, "because I'm the eldest. And you two can join The Kelvey girls, Lil and Else, are to be left out because they are the daughters of a rumoured criminal father and a washerwoman mother.

They were the daughters of a spry, hardworking little washerwoman, who went about from house to house by the day. This was awful enough. But where was Mr. Kelvey? Nobody knew for certain. But everybody said he was in prison. So they were the daughters of a washerwoman and a jailbird.

Everyone avoids them. Isabel, being the eldest of the Burnell girls, gets the power to choose who will be the first ones to come and see their doll's house. Eventually, all the girls get an opportunity to get a glimpse of the house and admire it, except the Kelveys. No one seems to bother about them, but Kezia is eager to show the two girls what the doll's house looks like. At the end, Lil and our Else do get to see it despite aunt Beryl's angry and rude words.

Presently our Else nudged up close to her sister. But now she had forgotten the cross lady. She put out a finger and stroked her sister's quill; she smiled her rare smile. "I seen the little lamp," she said, softly. Then both were silent once more.

## *7.4 CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON THE STORY*

Mansfield's stories are complex in the development of themes. The story begins with a description of a doll's house presented to the girls by Mrs. Hay. The three Burnell girls are quite excited about it and eager to tell their friends at school. Isabel, being the eldest, demands privilege of telling the girls about the house. The power to speak is in itself a symbol of authority. In the family hierarchy, where the eldest is allowed to speak first, we see an example of class distinctions. As soon as the girls reach school and Isabel whispers to the girls that she has something to share at playtime, the doll's house becomes a symbol of power. Isabel has authority and she will choose what to say and what not to about the doll's house. She decides to ignore the lamp and talk about the carpet and the beds with the real bedclothes. When the girls get invited to have a look at the house, they are grateful to Isabel. Here the doll's house is a symbol of wealth, class and social status. It gives Isabel a popularity and power over the other girls. To have seen the doll's house is to have partaken of the pleasures of the elite class. No wonder, the Kelveys are denied that pleasure as they are treated as pariahs. For Isabel, the lamp does not exist. It is only Kezia who speaks fervently about the lamp. But she is not heard because she is denied the authority to tell. She reminds Isabel of the lamp but realizes that 'Isabel wasn't making half enough of the little lamp' and states that 'the lamp's best of all'. Nobody pays attention to what Kezia says, none but our Else. It is the lamp that binds Kezia and Else together. As soon as Kezia saw the lamp, she was wonderstruck. She found everything else in the doll's house out of place; only the lamp looked as if it belonged. 'It seemed to smile at Kezia, to say, "I live here". The lamp was real'. Else is the only person to have taken note of what Kezia says. We know this because at the end of the story she tells Lil, "I seen the little lamp" and she smiles her rare smile.

When the lamp was mentioned for the first time, we realize that Mansfield wants us to see it in a particular way. When finally Else too notices the lamp, its importance is asserted again. What could the lamp symbolize? The lamp is marginalized by Isabel in her description of the doll's house and Isabel as we

know stands for power. It is only ironical then that two marginalized beings provide significance to the marginalized lamp. Both Kezia and Else, as we have earlier noted, are marginalized in different ways. Given the fact that Mansfield wants the lamp to gain importance, we could conclude that she as a writer wants to offer narrative privilege to the socially or politically under-privileged. In fact, R.J. Rees in his discussion on the short story has made the following observation about Mansfield:

It is not only artistic skill and brilliance which show Katherine Mansfield's genius. She has also the qualities of humanity and passion which mark the great writer as distinct from the writer who is only clever. She is particularly good at picturing people who are lonely or misunderstood or social misfits… (Rees, 225)

It must have become clear by now that even though Kezia belongs to the Burnell family, she is a misfit in that society. While Lottie and Isabel love visitors, Kezia likes to be alone. While her sisters enjoy the privileges of their wealth and class, Kezia feels sorry for the two Kelvey sisters. She wants to show them the doll's house not because she feels proud of the possession and wants to show off, but because she feels compassion for the two miserable outcasts. Isabel and Lottie unquestioningly accept their parents' authority which makes them creatures as well as creators of power structures. Kezia on the other hand questions her mother: '"Mother", said Kezia, "can't I ask the Kelveys just once?" . . . 'But why not?"' Mansfield gives even a more special place to Else. By frequently calling Else Kelvey 'our Else', she calls upon the readers to sympathise with this little girl. Her description of Else also shows her compassion for the girl:

> 'But whatever our Else wore she would have looked strange. She was a tiny wishbone of a child, with cropped hair and enormous solemn eyes – a little white owl. Nobody had seen her smile; she scarcely ever spoke.'

It is perhaps not coincidence alone that Else is compared to the owl. Beside her enormous solemn eyes which make her look like an owl, there are other metaphorical connections as well. Traditionally, an owl is the symbol of wisdom and intuitive knowledge. When you are called a white owl, you are credited with

the capacity to see beyond deceit and illusion, to discover what is true. When Else is called a white owl, she is granted the capability to discover truth, truth as symbolized by the little lamp. The lamp transcends all distinctions created by class and wealth and becomes a symbol of truth. It is a symbol for Kezia's kindness and human warmth and defies the tyranny of class distinctions. Therefore, after Kezia, our Else is the only one to discover the importance of the lamp. This revelation brings out her true self and she smiles her rare smile. The 'real' lamp thus dispels the darkness that is there in Else's life created by class distinctions. Mansfield offers here a criticism of class structures present in English societies.

Children pervade all of Mansfield's stories. In 'The Doll's House', we have four girls who have been treated as four distinct individuals – Isabel, Lil, Kezia and Else. The elaborate way in which these children are dealt with in the story proves their importance. Isabel is sophisticated. She is an upper-class lady in the making. She maintains distance with the Kelveys, is proud and arrogant and loves to show-off her possession of the doll's house. She is materialistic as she finds the red carpet, the bedclothes and the stove more important than the lamp. Lil, on the other hand, is typical of her class – humble, quiet and plain-looking. Mansfield describes her in detail including her dress and hat. The major part of the story is, however, devoted to Kezia and Else. The story is primarily the story about these two girls. The bond which unites them is the little lamp that becomes the only worthy thing in the doll's house for these two girls. Marginalized in different ways, they become representative of what is human and good and genuine. The others dim out compared to the glow seen in these two girls owing to their goodness. Children also contribute to the perspective of the narrator. Often, the narrator becomes a child and we see the whole world through the eyes of little girls. The doll's house, for example, is seen through the eyes of the Burnell sisters and also through Else's eyes. Thus, children play an important role in Mansfield's stories.

When we discuss the structure of any fictional work, we need to see it in two ways – the narrative structure and the thematic structure. Modern fiction is

known as much for its innovations in style as for its complex structure. One of the significant innovations in style is perhaps the stream-of-consciousness technique we find in Woolf, Joyce and Henry James. However, there is another group that focuses more on the complexity of subject matter rather than style: writers like E.M. Forster, D.H. Lawrence and Katherine Mansfield. Even though Mansfield was much influenced by and in turn influenced Woolf, yet Mansfield's style is quite different from that of Woolf. In 'The Doll's House', for example, Mansfield creates a simple narrative structure while there is an intricate web of themes connected together by a complex thematic structure. The story is told by an omniscient narrator and yet it appears to be the perspective of a child, may be one of the Burnell children. As the story progresses, it becomes clearer from the simplicity with which things are narrated that it is indeed a child telling us the story. At times, however, the omniscient narrator takes over and we see a change in tone of the narrative. This shift from child to adult and back again to a child narrator has a purpose to serve. The child's perspective tells us the story focusing on the beauty and wonder of the doll's house, on the girls' talk in school and on the attitude of the children towards the Kelveys. However, Mansfield needs to express her views on class and power structure and on the adult life in the story. For this she makes use of an adult omniscient narrator as her mouthpiece. Thus two perspectives work simultaneously in the story. The first time that we notice a shift in the narrative is in the paragraph beginning with "For the fact was, the school the Burnell children went to was not at all the place their parents would have chosen if there had been any choice." The rest of the lines simply follow the tone. How are these lines different? They speak of class distinctions, something that little girls like Kezia could not be conscious of. The Burnell children seem to stand out even among the relatively respectable families – the judge's and the doctor's. There were qualms about allowing them to mix with the storekeeper's or the milkman's children but the Kelveys were just taboo to all the rest. Even the teacher had a special voice for them. We are told that the Burnells set the trend in 'all matters of behaviour' because with social status comes power – the power to choose and the power to decide. In their behaviour towards the Kelveys we see the cruelty arising from class distinctions. When Isabel tells the girls about the doll's

house at playtime, the narrative again shifts to girlish chattering and we know that it is again a child narrator at work. There is a second shift to an adult voice when aunt Beryl sees the Kelveys admiring the doll's house:

> The afternoon had been awful. A letter had come from Willie Brent, a terrifying, threatening letter, saying if she did not meet him that evening in Pulman's Bush, he'd come to the front door and ask the reason why!

What is the narrator trying to do? She shows us power shifts. Beryl, a terrified and threatened woman vents her anger and frustration on somebody inferior to her – a child and a child belonging to a socially inferior class. It shows us how power structures work: a man taunted and oppressed by a woman, a child by an adult and a poor girl by a rich woman. This, the narrative structure of the story is instrumental in conveying the subtle nuances of meaning of the same.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. Discuss the significance of the little lamp in the doll's house

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2. Write a character sketch of our Else.

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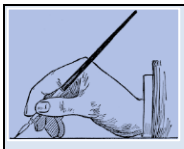
## *7.5 AMA ATA AIDOO: LIFE AND WORKS*

Christina Ama Ata Aidoo was born in 1942 in central Ghana, Africa. She completed her graduation from the University of Ghana, Legon, in 1964 and studied creative writing at Stanford University. She has taught English literature in England, the United States and Kenya. She is a versatile writer and her oeuvre includes drama, poetry, short stories and novels. Some of her well-known works are *Anowa* (1970), *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977), *Someone Talking to Someone* (1985), *Birds and Other Poems* (1987), *The Eagle and the Chickens and Other Stories* (1988), *No Sweetness Here: A Collection of Short Stories* (1995), and *Changes* (1991). The recurrent themes in almost all her works are the impact of colonialism on the Africans, the difficulties of women seeking independence and African oral recitations. She was awarded the 1992 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for her novel *Changes* (1991). She presently lives in Ghana.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. Name a few literary works of Ama Ata Aidoo.

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2. Name the novel for which Ama Ata Aidoo was awarded the 1992 Commonwealth Writers' Prize.

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## *7.6 READING 'SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT ON THE WAY TO THE FUNERAL'*

'Something to Talk About on the Way to the Funeral' is a story in which all the recurrent themes of Aidoo's works are presented through a dialogic narration. Two women discuss a dead woman on the way to her funeral. The deceased woman Auntie Araba emerges as a strong, independent woman who had made her own living without help from any man. And yet, we are compelled to question, is she independent? Or is she even allowed to remain independent? We cannot be sure about everything that is told here. For, like Gilman's narrative, here too, there is no omniscient narrator. We depend on flashbacks, hearsay, and gossips to form our idea of Auntie Araba. Though the story seems to tell us about Araba, her troubles, her struggle to establish herself as an independent woman, yet we soon realize that it is much more than that. What the narrator tells us is not wholly from first-hand knowledge of Araba. She has learnt half of it from her mother and other women around her. Therefore, here again as before, the reader has to use his or her discretions in interpreting the narrative.

## *7.7 CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON THE STORY*

Aidoo's apparently simple story, 'Something to Talk About on the Way to the Funeral' has unmistakable reference to colonialism. When we talk about the political history of any African nation, the first thing that comes to our mind is the impact of colonialism. This can be clearly seen in the conflicts in religion, economics and society. Christianization is one major impact of colonialism. Araba's son goes to a missionary school in the Wesleyan chapel. Araba herself was a 'good Christian' who went to church twice every Sunday. Mansa's father is totally influenced by the Christian world and believed that the best thing for his daughter would be 'when she reached the biggest college in the white man's land'. It seems that Christianity and the white man's land are all-pervading in this African land. However, one look at the narrative tells us that there is a touch of irony in the way colonialism is presented. Everything evil or unacceptable seems

to come from the West. Both Araba and Mansa are molested by men who are either educated in the West or live there. As the narrator tells us they were now 'selling beauty to (their) big men in the towns'. Her listener also accepts that fact when she says, 'you know indeed these our educated big men have never been up to much good'. Moreover, Araba's misfortune seems to falsify the claims of the followers of church that those who believe in god and the church are never in trouble. Again, when Adwoa says that auntie Araba will go to heaven, the narrator remarks very skeptically, 'if there is heaven and god is not like man, my sister.' This skepticism is not simply a disbelief of Christianity but a state of conflict between the new and the old order. The new order comes with colonial rule which brings with it a new system of religion, education and culture. The old order is the age-old system that the Ghanaian people have been living with. It is not very easy to come out of this system and they are reluctant as well. Hence the conflict and apprehension. This conflict also becomes evident when Araba is unable to sell fancy food like 'atwemo', 'bofrot', 'boodo' and the like. As the narrator and her listener tell us, these foods appeal only to townsmen and not to hardworking farm people with their hard-earned money. Finally it was plain bread that Araba earned her living by. Despite the conflict, however, these two cultures also seem to co-exist in that same society. Bread is, after all, a biblical food. When Araba falls sick towards the end, it is again both systems of medicine that are tried, 'hospitals first, then our own doctors and their herbs'. When Adwoa learns about Ato's real father coming to adopt him, she remarks: 'if I had been auntie Araba, eh, I would have charged him about a thousand pounds for neglect'. Pound as we know is a unit of currency used in England and the easy manner in which Adwoa makes it a part of her speech shows the extent of the west's influence on the African people. What is Aidoo trying to do here? Perhaps her intention is to bring to light the fact that English vocabulary is so ingrained in people's minds that they use it unconsciously. This is what we find in every aspect of their life. Whether in medicine or economics or religion we find both the cultures existing together. Even in Araba's funeral, they perform the rites of both the cultures – they have a funeral at the churchyard and then they will have the libation ceremony at the next Akwanbo. This confluence of African and Christian cultures is significant in our

understanding of Ghanaian contemporary society and the changing status of woman as reflected in the story.

The African society and its culture were undergoing changes and Aidoo probably was unable to accept them. She was politically conscious enough to realize women's gradual marginalization in the African society. In an interview with Anuradha Dingwaney, she says: "Decay of Africa's social, political and economic systems is directly related to the complete marginalization of women from developmental discourses". In the story, in the celebration of the space allowed to women in native African culture, Aidoo is probably trying to reclaim the centrality of women. So the narrator, the listener and the subject of their dialogue are all women. It is only in such a society that an exploited woman like Araba does not suffer humiliation even after what happens to her. Araba is self-sustaining; her bread-making aids not only in her physical sustenance but also in cultural sustenance. The self-dependence of Ghanaian women is symbolized in the bread-making that Araba and, later, Mansa resort to. Bread-making also hints at the new ways a woman can find to move on in life even after disasters. Araba would have probably suffered more in a patriarchal world order but not in African culture. This is why many men are willing to accept her as a wife along with her son. This is what Aidoo stresses in this story. The two women indulge in gossip about Araba but feel very strongly for her. They do not say or feel anything ill about her and, in fact, admire her. This is because Araba presents the epitome of an independent woman who not only sustains herself but helps others as well. Mansa for example is trained by Araba and finally finds in bread-making, a release from victimization.

In this story, there is a listener who is addressed by the narrator as 'Adwoa, my sister', while the identity of the narrator is never revealed. We only know that she is a woman. This narrator knows the importance of her role. She may not be omniscient but she is a carrier of stories from the past. She informs her listener and, thereby, the readers whatever she has learnt from her elders and also from first-hand experience. According to Edward Sackey, oral traditions have been the main method of teaching history among many African peoples including the

Akans of Ghana. In this case, the history recounted is personal and individual – that of a woman who had been some kind of a role model for the women of her community. Auntie Araba, as the narrator calls her, was an independent woman who struggled hard for her survival as well as to preserve her integrity. As the narrator tells the story, she adds her comments on the changing times, the social conditions and the economic status of the people. The listener is impatient to hear the story to the end and has her own questions. But the narrator does not like interruptions and at one point asks her to be quiet: 'you have said it. But be quiet and listen. I have not finished my story.' The narrator speaks from authority that she gets from her role as story-teller. She is Aidoo's mouthpiece as her comments reflect Aidoo's views on her society and culture. Araba belongs to a different time than the narrator or the listener. They were children when Araba started making and selling bread. So, she tells us what she has heard from her mother: 'my mother says she really was a come-and-have-a-look type, when she was a girl'. This is an important aspect of Akan culture'. Most of these societies are matrilineal or women-centric and hence the authority comes from a mother. Her narration is authenticated as she hears it from her mother. She speaks of the impact of western education and city life on the villagers, and the effect is certainly a degradation rather than uplifting: 'if she was a young woman at this time when they are selling beauty to our big men in the towns, she would have made something for herself.' The narrator here does not only describe Araba's beauty but also reveals woman's status in contemporary society.

One important quality in a good narrator is discretion. She should know what to tell and what not and also how to say it. Our narrator here is found gossiping at times about how Araba's trouble had begun and she says this in a hush-hush tone. She also expects her listener to keep trust and maintain secrecy. It is spoken in the listener's ears by the narrator, but there is ample clue left for a conscious reader to understand what it might be.

Another important thing we need to take note of here is that the narrator is not completely reliable. There are incidents in Araba's life which the narrator

could not have witnessed, she being much younger. Therefore, she is unsure about certain facts like who the person is who had exploited Araba in her adolescence

These features are part of the narrative style. In order to reproduce the oral story-telling tradition, Aidoo deliberately subverts the traditional western tradition of an omniscient, confident narrator who presumes to know all and instead uses an idiomatic style of an unreliable narator. Even though the unfamiliar words leave us wondering what they might mean, they also help retain a folk flavour. Aidoo does this not to distance the reader from the text, but to acquaint them with the African tradition.

## *7.8 SUMMING UP*

To sum up, this unit presented two beautiful short stories by the writers- Katherine Mansfield and Ama Ata Aidoo. Mansfield's story 'The Doll's House' tells the story from a child's perspective. But, with periodic comments from an adult's perspective, the story reveals the workings of class and gender structures and their intersections in society. Aidoo's story is again about a woman's struggle to keep up her living and support another one in society. Through the presentation of an African matrilineal society which is introduced to the changes brought by colonization, Aidoo draws a realistic portrait in her story. Moreover, she tries to retain a folk-flavour in her story by bringing in the devices of oral storytelling, use of unfamiliar words and an unreliable narrator. Thus, the two women writers beautifully capture the subjective nature of women's experiences through the medium of the selected short stories.

## *7.9 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS*

1. What is meant by the assertion that "the lamp was real"? Discuss the significance of the little lamp in the doll's house.

2. Comment on the treatment of children by Mansfield in the story 'The Doll's House'.

3. What is the narrator's attitude towards Else? Why is Else invariably called 'our Else'?

4. Why is Willie Brent mentioned at all in the story? What do you think is his relationship with Beryl? Does this have any thematic significance?

5. How does Katherine Mansfield interweave the issues of class and gender in her story 'The Doll's House'?

6. Discuss the narrative technique employed by Ama Ata Aidoo in her story 'Something to talk about on the way to the Funeral'. What is its significance?

7. How does Aidoo project female camaraderie in 'Something to talk about on the way to the Funeral'? What is its significance?

8. What are the literal and symbolic uses of bread in Aidoo's narrative?

9. Aidoo's narrative presents conflicting systems of religion, medicine, education, economics and so on. How are these systems and conflicts treated in the story? What effect does it have on your reading of the story?

10. Compare and contrast the narrative techniques of Katherine Mansfield and Ama Ata Aidoo, keeping in mind the short stories- 'The Doll's House' and 'Something to talk about on the way to the Funeral'.

## *7.10 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS*


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## APPENDIX

***AMY LOWELL***

### 'A Japanese Wood-carving'

High up above the open, welcoming door

It hangs, a piece of wood with colours dim.

Once, long ago, it was a waving tree

And knew the sun and shadow through the leaves

Of forest trees, in a thick eastern wood.

The winter snows had bent its branches down,

The spring had swelled its buds with coming flowers,

Summer had run like fire through its veins,

While autumn pelted it with chestnut burrs,

And strewed the leafy ground with acorn cups.

Dark midnight storms had roared and crashed among

Its branches, breaking here and there a limb;

But every now and then broad sunlit days

Lovingly lingered, caught among the leaves.

Yes, it had known all this, and yet to us

It does not speak of mossy forest ways,

Of whispering pine trees or the shimmering birch;

But of quick winds, and the salt, stinging sea!

An artist once, with patient, careful knife,

Had fashioned it like to the untamed sea.

Here waves uprear themselves, their tops blown back

By the gay, sunny wind, which whips the blue

And breaks it into gleams and sparks of light.

Among the flashing waves are two white birds

Which swoop, and soar, and scream for very joy

At the wild sport. Now diving quickly in,

Questing some glistening fish. Now flying up,

Their dripping feathers shining in the sun,

While the wet drops like little glints of light,

Fall pattering backward to the parent sea.

Gliding along the green and foam-flecked hollows,

Or skimming some white crest about to break,

The spirits of the sky deigning to stoop

And play with ocean in a summer mood.

Hanging above the high, wide open door,

It brings to us in quiet, firelit room,

The freedom of the earth's vast solitudes,

Where heaping, sunny waves tumble and roll,

And seabirds scream in wanton happiness.

## 'A Ballad of Footmen'

Now what in the name of the sun and the stars

Is the meaning of this most unholy of wars?

Do men find life so full of humour and joy

That for want of excitement they smash up the toy?

Fifteen millions of soldiers with popguns and horses

All bent upon killing, because their "of courses"

Are not quite the same. All these men by the ears,

And nine nations of women choking with tears.

It is folly to think that the will of a king

Can force men to make ducks and drakes of a thing

They value, and life is, at least one supposes,

Of some little interest, even if roses

Have not grown up between one foot and the other.

What a marvel bureaucracy is, which can smother

Such quite elementary feelings, and tag

A man with a number, and set him to wag

His legs and his arms at the word of command

Or the blow of a whistle! He's certainly damned,

Fit only for mince-meat, if a little gold lace

And an upturned moustache can set him to face

Bullets, and bayonets, and death, and diseases,

Because some one he calls his Emperor, pleases.

If each man were to lay down his weapon, and say,

With a click of his heels, "I wish you Good-day,"

Now what, may I ask, could the Emperor do?

A king and his minions are really so few.

Angry? Oh, of course, a most furious Emperor!

But the men are so many they need not mind his temper, or

The dire results which could not be inflicted.

With no one to execute sentence, convicted

Is just the weak wind from an old, broken bellows.

What lackeys men are, who might be such fine fellows!

To be killing each other, unmercifully,

At an order, as though one said, “Bring up the tea.”

Or is it that tasting the blood on their jaws

They lap at it, drunk with its ferment, and laws

So patiently builded, are nothing to drinking

More blood, any blood. They don’t notice its stinking.

I don’t suppose tigers do, fighting cocks, sparrows,

And, as to men — what are men, when their marrows

Are running with blood they have gulped; it is plain

Such excellent sport does not recollect pain.

Toll the bells in the steeples left standing. Half-mast

The flags which meant order, for order is past.

Take the dust of the streets and sprinkle your head,

The civilization we’ve worked for is dead.

Squeeze into this archway, the head of the line

Has just swung round the corner to `Die Wacht am Rhein’.

## ‘A Winter Ride’

Who shall declare the joy of the running!

Who shall tell of the pleasures of flight!

Springing and spurning the tufts of wild heather,

Sweeping, wide-winged, through the blue dome of light.

Everything mortal has moments immortal,

Swift and God-gifted, immeasurably bright.

So with the stretch of the white road before me,

Shining snow-crystals rainbowed by the sun,

Fields that are white, stained with long, cool, blue shadows,

Strong with the strength of my horse as we run.

Joy in the touch of the wind and the sunlight!

Joy! With the vigorous earth I am one.

***ADRIENNE RICH***

## ‘Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers’

Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen,

Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.

They do not fear the men beneath the tree;

They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.

Aunt Jennifer's finger fluttering through her wool

Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.

The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band

Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.

When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie

Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.

The tigers in the panel that she made

Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.

**'Dreamwood'**

In the old, scratched, cheap wood of the typing stand

there is a landscape, veined, which only a child can see

or the child's older self, a poet,

a woman dreaming when she should be typing

the last report of the day. If this were a map,

she thinks, a map laid down to memorize

because she might be walking it, it shows

ridge upon ridge fading into hazed desert

here and there a sign of aquifers

and one possible watering-hole. If this were a map

it would be the map of the last age of her life,

not a map of choices but a map of variations

on the one great choice. It would be the map by which

she could see the end of touristic choices,

of distances blued and purpled by romance,

by which she would recognize that poetry

isn't revolution but a way of knowing

why it must come. If this cheap, mass-produced

wooden stand from the Brooklyn Union Gas Co.,

mass-produced yet durable, being here now,

is what it is yet a dream-map

so obdurate, so plain,

she thinks, the material and the dream can join

and that is the poem and that is the late report.

## 'Planetarium'

*Thinking of Caroline Herschel (1750—1848),*
*astronomer, sister of William; and others.*

A woman in the shape of a monster

a monster in the shape of a woman

the skies are full of them

a woman 'in the snow

among the Clocks and instruments

or measuring the ground with poles'

in her 98 years to discover

8 comets

she whom the moon ruled

like us

levitating into the night sky

riding the polished lenses

Galaxies of women, there

doing penance for impetuousness

ribs chilled

in those spaces of the mind

An eye,

'virile, precise and absolutely certain'

from the mad webs of Uranusborg

encountering the NOVA

every impulse of light exploding

from the core

as life flies out of us

Tycho whispering at last

‘Let me not seem to have lived in vain’

What we see, we see

and seeing is changing

the light that shrivels a mountain

and leaves a man alive

Heartbeat of the pulsar

heart sweating through my body

The radio impulse

pouring in from Taurus

I am bombarded yet I stand

I have been standing all my life in the

direct path of a battery of signals

the most accurately transmitted most

untranslatable language in the universe

I am a galactic cloud so deep so invo-

luted that a light wave could take 15

years to travel through me And has

taken I am an instrument in the shape

of a woman trying to translate pulsations

into images for the relief of the body

and the reconstruction of the mind.

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**JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS**

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**JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS**

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