UNIT 3 HUMANITIES

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous two units, you have read about how feminist perspectives have been crucial in dismantling the inherent biases in the natural sciences and the social sciences. This unit on feminist critiques of knowledge focuses on the disciplines of philosophy, literature and psychoanalysis, areas of study which fall under the rubric of humanities. These disciplines individually and collectively explore the meaning and implications of what it means to be human (derived from the term ‘humanitas’). Each discipline offers varying sets of frames or fixes on the world with its/their concomitant worldviews. Here, we will examine the assumptions underlying these disciplinary frameworks and scrutinize these assumptions (which are often unstated) from a variety of feminist perspectives. The effect of exploring these disciplines from feminist perspectives invariably results in disturbing and radically questioning our familiar understandings of traditional disciplinary frameworks. In the sections below, we will do this by looking specifically at the disciplines of philosophy, psychoanalysis, and literature.
3.2 OBJECTIVES

This unit will help you to:

- Observe how the disciplines of philosophy, literature and psychoanalysis are structured and informed by patriarchal assumptions;
- Examine the complicity between traditional knowledge systems and patriarchy and understand its pervasive and insidious nature;
- Explore these disciplinary norms and frameworks through the lens of feminist critiques;
- Explain how this leads to a radical reconstitution of knowledge, where new questions are raised, new issues foregrounded and new paradigms are established; and
- Focus on the resultant changes that have radically altered the contours of previously existing disciplines.

3.3 FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF KNOWLEDGE: PHILOSOPHY

Let us begin our exploration in the humanities by looking at the feminist critiques of philosophy, focusing in particular on its component parts: epistemology, logic and ethics. Philosophy occupies a unique position in the spectrum of disciplines since the method it advocates applies to almost all other areas of knowledge. Philosophy sees itself, and is seen by others, as providing both an explanation for and a critique of, the presumptions and forms of argument used in other knowledges. Further, because many disciplines rely on philosophical positions to justify themselves, feminist interventions into philosophy may be of major strategic significance in the assessment and transformation of both philosophy and other academic disciplines (Grosz, 1990).

In other words, since philosophy lends its methods of enquiry, its analytical and investigative procedures, its in-built skepticism about truth-claims to other disciplines, questions raised here exert a ripple-effect and dislodge basic/fundamental propositions across a range of disciplines. Further, the discursive tools and analytical strategies employed by feminist scholars share a common ground with the theoretical frameworks and methods of philosophical research. For example, questions to do with logic and reason, questions about cognition (what can be known and how do we know it) and epistemology (philosophy of knowledge) comprise the core issues of philosophy, even as they constitute central questions for feminist theory.
Feminist critics detect a pervasive sense of male domination in the definitions, concepts and methods used by “malestream philosophy”. (The term ‘malestream’ is a play on the terms ‘mainstream’ and ‘male’ since feminists observe that mainstream views often tend to be male-centred.) Whether it is logic or reason and the analytical strategies generated by them, the dominance of these categories have been critiqued as being methodologically and epistemologically suspect. Mainstream/ traditional philosophers have often failed to distinguish between knowledge and prejudice and masked their failure to do so by adopting a facade of neutrality. Similarly, there is an attempt to conceal the fact that many assumptions about logic and knowledge also have political implications. An example from a detective story narrating the famed deductive prowess of Sherlock Holmes, the renowned 19th century detective created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle would serve to illustrate how the absolutist categories of reason and logic are ideologically suspect. In *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle* Holmes, applying his immense powers of observation and deduction, speculates on the identity of an unknown hat owner on the basis of the hat he has left behind. Holmes infers that the man in question is an intellectual, an inference which is premised on the size of his brain; that he has recently fallen into disrepute (since the hat, though of a good make, is in bad condition) and that he has lost his wife’s affection. The last inference is premised on the fact that the hat has not been properly cleaned or brushed. What becomes clear in the course of Holmes’s ruminations is that observations with a near universal application are actually revealed, on careful scrutiny, to be grounded on very specific notions and practices. Thus, a piece of inference which seems at first glance to be apparently neutral is revealed as being the cultural constructions of a specific milieu with patriarchal presuppositions. Reason and logic are not always handmaidens of truth, but are fallible and therefore, suspect.

**Standpoint Epistemology**

The truth claims of traditional philosophy and epistemology (philosophy of knowledge) have also been undermined by feminist critiques that demonstrate the contingent and provisional, rather than the absolute nature of truth. The urge to discover an absolute and universally applicable truth is a kind of self-deception and mired in contradiction. Further, it is a product of patriarchal epistemology, and has come under attack from various schools of feminist theorists. In response to the claims that truth is absolute, forwarded by “malestream” epistemology, feminist theorists have propounded the counter discourse of ‘standpoint epistemology’. Feminist standpoint theorists, according to Mary Hawkesworth, reject the notion of an
Feminist Critiques of Knowledge

“unmediated truth”, arguing that knowledge is always mediated by a host of factors related to an “individual’s particular position in a determinate socio-political formation at a specific point in time” in history. Class, caste race and gender necessarily structure the individual’s understanding of reality and inform all knowledge claims. Thus, how we know what we know is conditioned by several mediating factors and there is no one privileged perspective or a single voice which emerges as the right one. By focusing on cognition as a human practice, a critical feminist epistemology can identify, explain, and refute persistent patriarchal bias within the dominant discourses (Hawkesworth, 1986).

The concept of standpoint epistemology is central to the feminist reconceptualizing of knowledge and theories to do with knowledge and how we gain it. Unlike feminist postmodernists, a group which rejects the idea and existence of an absolute truth, standpoint theorists do not reject the notion of truth altogether. They instead argue that certain social positions are more conducive to gaining a comprehensive view of the world. According to them, the oppressed and marginalized have a more comprehensive idea of reality. Standpoint theory seeks to extend the scope and ambit of philosophy by including within it the lived experiences of diverse social groups, groups which exist outside the pale of recognized sociopolitical formations and challenge the limits of theory.

**Feminist Critique of the Exclusion of the Feminine**

The dominant theme that runs through feminist critiques of knowledge is that western (and other) civilizations have constructed themselves on the basis of their exclusion of the feminine. Feminist critics feel that right from Plato to Hegel to the post-Enlightenment period, knowledge-systems and theoretical discourse have consolidated themselves upon an exclusion/marginalization of the values associated with the feminine. This habit of thinking is reflected in a worldview where experience is structured into binaries of rational-irrational, good-bad, day-night, light-darkness, rational-irrational, active-passive, culture-nature. In these binaries, the feminine is associated with the negative or complementary term and relegated to secondary status. The task of a feminist epistemology is to dismantle these binaries and deconstruct patriarchal discourse, by showing how the operations of power and its intermingling with politics inform and reinforce these categories.

In a similar vein, the work of women philosophers have been denied epistemological authority and their contributions to philosophical enquiry has been denied any space or legitimacy. Apart from the exclusion and
making invisible of women in the field of philosophy, what is also problematic is the representation or figuration of women within the field of philosophy. Women are portrayed as irrational, emotional and their intuitive approaches to knowledge and to experience are shown as inferior modes of cognition.

The feminist critique is best summed up in the articulation of some radical feminist philosophers whose critique has been summed up by Elizabeth Grosz:

- **Feminist philosophers question the belief in a single, eternal universal truth independent of the observer’s history or social conditions. In other words, philosophy seeks a position outside history, politics and power.**

- **Feminist scholars critique the belief in objective, that is, in observer-neutral, context-free, disinterested knowledge. The idea of intellectual rigour in the masculinist sciences is also questioned by them.**

- **The belief in a stable, reliable, transhistorical (the same across all times and cultures) subject of knowledge or a subject which is disembodied, has no emotions or opinions, is no longer accepted by feminist critics.**

- **The belief in a transparent language and discursive forms that are open to the pure transcription of thought is radically questioned by philosophers. Philosophy denies its status as textual and literary by denying its own material dependence on representation, figurative expression etc.**

- **The belief in truth claims of traditional philosophy is discredited (Grosz, 1990).**

The critique of masculinist theorizing outlined above extends into specific areas of philosophy, which are delineated below:

- **Epistemology:** Feminist philosophers question cognitive processes and methods of acquiring knowledge. There is also a questioning of the distinction between subject and object (the idea of the cyborg that you may have read about in an earlier unit is relevant here). Formulation of feminist standpoint theory. Feminist epistemologists question overarching truths and the notion of experience, which they feel is mediated by specific cultural representations.

- **Ontology:** Ontology is a branch of philosophical thought that has to do with being, nature of reality, and subjectivity or what constitutes experience and reality. Feminist philosophers destabilize the parameters of what constitutes the real and of experience.
**Feminist Critiques of Knowledge**

- **Logic:** Feminist theorists challenge the supremacy of reason (particularly instrumental reason), masculine logic (exemplified in linear thinking) and the workings of common sense. Feminist theorists express a mistrust of empiricism, which is the belief that all knowledge is derived from experience and observation and is based on the exercise of reason. Reason has been dislodged from its position of supremacy and seen increasingly as a weapon of oppression. In masculine hands, logic and “masculine reasoning becomes an underhand form of force” (De Beauvoir, 1952, p. 612).

- **Metaphysics:** Feminist theorists increasingly question the validity of a master metaphysics, a universal frame of reference to theorize about diverse communities and groups. They see this as a false and spurious universalism.

- **Ethics:** Feminist theorists substitute an ethics of care, rather than abstract ideas of morality, justice and the common good. Carol Gilligan’s *In A Different Voice* (1982) puts forward a different trajectory of moral development for women based on an ethics of care rather than an ethics of justice.

The basic premises of feminist philosophy would refute the truth claims and disinterestedness of the above. It would instead advocate:

- **Acceptance of its own status as being partial, context-specific and coming from a particular perspective with its concomitant politics.**
  - Promotes perspectivism and a plurality of perspectives.

- **Rejection of binaries which often structure our modes of thinking.**
  - Feminist theory questions and dislodges binaries.

- **Interrogation of the separation of subject and object of knowledge.**

- **Critique of and expansion of the concept of reason.**

- **No gap between theory and practice. Instead, theory is a form of practice.**

Further, it is important to keep in mind that there is more than one feminist critique of knowledge. There are several shades of opinion within feminist philosophy and epistemology. As indicated earlier, the standpoint theorists do not, unlike the feminist postmodernists, reject the notion of truth altogether. They merely state that it is mediated and dependent on perception based on one’s location.

**Feminist Postmodernists**

In contrast to the viewpoints of the standpoint theorists mentioned above, feminist postmodernists emphasize the “*situatedness*” of each finite observer.
in a particular socio-political, historical context. They invoke the notion of “situatedness” to challenge the plausibility of claims that any perspective on the world could escape partiality and lay claim to universal knowledge (Hawkesworth, 1986). The radical implications of standpoint theory are fully explored by feminist postmodernists who present a powerful critique of knowledge. Feminist standpoint theory can be viewed as the product of a more stable world view than feminist postmodernisms, since in the latter, reality and experience are viewed in a much more abstract way. While postmodernism and poststructuralism have undoubtedly presented one of the greatest challenges to traditional canons of philosophy, so is the challenge of local feminisms, mass migration and transnational identities in a post-globalized context.

Further, there are challenges to the borders and boundaries of philosophy as it has been usually conceptualized. As Andrea Nye points out, there is a divide between materials that have inspired feminist philosophers and the currently established canons of philosophy. Given the thorough questioning of the status of reality and the challenges posed to its constructions (cyber feminism, artificial intelligence etc), feminist philosophers have postulated the instability and fluidity of the parameters of philosophy. By their redefinition of philosophy, poetry, sociology, memoirs can stake their claim to be included within the ambit of philosophy, thereby causing philosophers to revise and expand their arguments. Feminist philosophers have also argued that emotion is integral to reasoning and have brought out some of the ways in which emotion traverses the divide between mind and body (Jaggar, 1996). They have thus effected a paradigm shift in philosophy.

Let us now look at the role played by feminist theorists and critics in the discipline of psychoanalysis to see the extent of the impact of a feminist critique in that discipline.

Check Your Progress

i) How do feminist critics challenge the notion of the absolute nature of truth? What is the role of ‘standpoint epistemology’ in this regard?

ii) Based on your understanding of Elizabeth Grosz’ summary of the feminist critique of philosophy, can you illustrate each one of these aspects with the help of your own examples? Or, discuss each of these with your peers with the help of examples and illustrations.
3.4 FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF KNOWLEDGE: PSYCHOANALYSIS

Psychoanalysis has a unique and distinct process which you will read about in greater detail in Unit 2 of Block 5. It is primarily a method which involves people and investigates the working of the mind, with the aim of treating psychological illness. It involves giving voice to the patient/analysand's inner fears, traumas and conflicts as he/she articulates his/her thoughts, fantasies, dreams in an apparently random manner, which is called “free association”. The analyst listens to the patient and arrives at some conclusion about the conflicts affecting the patient and causing symptoms, often of hysteria.

Psychoanalysis was formulated at the end of the nineteenth century by Sigmund Freud, who was able to observe the uses of hypnosis and suggestion to alter, alleviate and transform hysterical symptoms. Freud developed a mode of therapeutic interpretation to understand and treat hysterical and neurotic symptoms. You will learn more about Freudian theories and feminist critiques of these theories in the unit on “Feminism and Psychoanalysis” in the next block. Here, we will attempt a brief overview to introduce you to some of the important issues.

3.4.1 Psychoanalysis and Feminism

The feminist critique of psychoanalysis is linked to the feminist critique of both philosophy and literature in several ways. These disciples are implicated in how men and women, or masculine and feminine, are defined and conceptualized in society. All of them are crucial in the shaping of gender. While philosophy focuses on the mind, thought-patterns and experiences, and literature focuses on the cultural and ideological, psychoanalysis concentrates on the relation between the psychical (mental) and the social.

The feminist critique of psychoanalysis consists of a continuing engagement of feminist critics of various schools and belief systems with Freudian psychoanalysis. While this section seeks to indicate a broad spectrum of views on the subject, it will at the same time focus on feminist reappropriations, rereadings and critiques of Freud which have been particularly productive. Here, we will also look at Jacques Lacan’s reading of Freud’s work which has influenced feminist postmodernists to a large extent. The work of Juliet Mitchell, Nancy Chodorow, Carol Gilligan, Jacqueline Rose and the French feminists provide the major signposts in the feminist engagement with and reinterpretation of Freud. You will come
across the contributions of some of these theorists again in the next block, as well as in the course on “Gendered Bodies and Sexualities.”

Freud’s theorisations about female sexuality are mainly evident in three essays on the same topic: “Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes” (1925), “Female Sexuality” (1931), and “Femininity’ (1933) and a few more essays and case studies. Freud’s initial theorisation in the 1925 essay does not really distinguish between the trajectories of sexual development in little girls and boys (an allegation also levelled against him by feminist theorists). By the time of the second essay, however, there is a clear distinction and a through exploration of the little girl’s intense relationship with the mother in the early pre-Oedipal phase. It is the stage after this, the crossing over to heterosexuality (which is considered normal sexuality) that, according to many feminists, is inadequately theorised by Freud. His interpretation of Dora’s case is particularly illustrative of what feminists call phallocentrism, since he visualises women as being primarily objects of exchange.

The feminist critique of Freudian psychoanalytical theory is sited on his presumption of a false universalism (the allegation that the structures he suggested were immutable and unchangeable). The further charges levelled against Freud are that of ahistoricism, particularly the reification of the nuclear family, heterosexism, biological essentialism and phallocentrism (Richmond, 2000). The feminist critique of psychoanalysis also extends to some basic assumptions of Freudian thought: that individuality is defined by separateness, that the girl’s lack of the phallus is the hallmark of femininity (Benjamin, 1986, p.82). Similarly the aim of therapy is criticized as reactionary, conservative and old-fashioned since it diverts patients from a political understanding of their discontents to the individual solution of personal adjustment to a (heterosexist) status quo (Richmond, 2000).

The Oedipal complex and the castration complex are central to psychoanalysis and Freud’s understanding of the masculine and feminine. (These aspects are laid out in greater detail in the unit on “Feminism and Psychoanalysis” in Block 5.) It is the nature of the distinctive negotiation with the Oedipus complex that helps define and distinguish between the masculine and the feminine. Freud theorises that while the male child’s Oedipus complex is abandoned due to fear of castration, the female child’s Oedipus complex is not resolved as definitively. Thus, while the boy enters patriarchal culture and accepts the law of the father, the girl treads a very ‘circuitous’ path to reach heterosexual femininity. Any failure to resolve the Oedipus complex prevents the crossing over to ‘normal’ sexuality and can
result in bisexuality, according to Juliet Mitchell's analysis in her essay on “Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Narrative and Wuthering Heights”, where Mitchell speculates on Cathy’s dilemma in the novel. According to Mitchell, Cathy is unable to achieve the leap to normal adult sexuality, but remains fixated in the grip of infantile desire.

Certain aspects of Freud’s theory which postulated or suggested female inferiority were critiqued by Karen Horney and Melanie Klein, who modified his ideas to articulate their own views. Klein, for example emphasized the importance of maternal functions and the presence of ‘breast envy’ in males, referring obliquely to Freud’s notion of ‘penis envy’ (signifying the sense of ‘lack’). Similar theoretical perspectives, which place the figure of the mother at the axis of psychoanalytic interpretations, are also found in the work of Bracha Ettinger. Ettinger’s comment on the maternal axis aspect as the starting point of therapy displaces the centrality of the father figure.

The attack of Freudian psychoanalysis continued in the works of feminists till the 1960s. Whether it is Simone de Beauvoir’s reading of how women are made the other in The Second Sex, or her critique of Freud’s work with its focus on instincts and drives, psychoanalysis was accused of embodying a sexist bias. Eva Figes, Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer and Kate Millett viewed psychoanalysis as being anti-women. They believed that:

Of all the factors that have served to perpetuate a male-orientated society that have hindered the free development of women in the western world today, the emergence of Freudian psychoanalysis has been the most serious (Figes, 1970, p.148).

Simone de Beauvoir feels that Freud’s ideas on the development of femininity should be squarely placed in the context of patriarchal society and the privileges it confers to men. Thus, she surmises that if girls desire a penis, it is because the latter is a symbol of the privileges enjoyed by boys.

Betty Friedan criticizes Freud’s attempt to universalize and generalize his account of psycho-sexual development. Thus, she surmises that Freud’s observations based on late nineteenth Vienna could not be extended to 1960s America. In a similar vein, a scathing critique of Freud’s perceived biological determinism was mounted by Kate Millett, who accused him of a ‘gross male-supremacist’ bias (Millett, 1969).
A change in tone and tenor was evident in the work of Juliet Mitchell who, in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974), was the first feminist theorist to engage productively with Freud, putting forward a view of Freud’s work which would resonate with feminist theory and strategy. Mitchell approached psychoanalysis as a tool for socio-historical analysis of women’s oppression (Mitchell, 1974, p. 114). Using the work of Freud and Lacan’s interpretation of Freud, which has been enormously influential, Mitchell viewed psychoanalysis as a changeable, mutable, socio-historical product, complemented by Althusser’s theory of ideology. Her attempt to historicize psychoanalysis was criticized by feminists like Jane Gallop (1982) who felt that one of the central problems with psychoanalysis was its ahistorical nature and Mitchell’s appropriation of Freud’s work tried too hard to reconcile psychoanalysis with feminist interests. The other accusation levelled against Mitchell was her misreading of Jacques Lacan, a charge that she addressed in her co-edited book along with Jacqueline Rose on *Feminine Sexuality* (1982). There, she argued that psychoanalysis is not about the “internalization” of “socially created sexual relations”, but about the “construction” of sexual difference (Brennan, 1991, p.115).

Jacques Lacan’s interpretation of Freud has been very influential as it energized the question of the place of psychoanalysis in feminist theory. The unconscious and sexuality are not seen by Lacan as natural or biological essences, but as the products of the subject’s constitution in language, within what he calls the imaginary and symbolic orders. According to Lacan’s model, the child is not born as a subject, but acquires subjectivity in the mirror-phase (an important stage, which falls between the Freudian Oedipal and phallic stage) when he/she enters the symbolic order and the order of language. Upon the mirror stage hinges the sense of a distinct separate identity when the child learns to separate itself from the (m)other. This is also when the child comes under the law-of-the-father or the patriarchal order. This moment of separation from the mother is also the moment when the subject takes up a masculine or a feminine position and identity. The distinction between the sexes is primarily a psychical distinction, not an anatomical one; the distinction centres around the ‘phallus’, which is the key signifier in the symbolic order. The phallus “becomes the first and definitive object of exchange, and initiates the child in a realm of socio-economic and symbolic exchange” (Rowley and Grosz 1990, p. 85).

Lacan’s imaginary and symbolic orders coincide roughly with the pre-Oedipal and Oedipal in the Freudian scheme: the first is the order of signs, of pure difference, difference without distinction or regulation; the second, the symbolic, by contrast is the order of signs, of distinction, law and
regulation (Wright, 1998). Feminist psychoanalysts like Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray have commented extensively on Lacan’s delineation of these phases. For Lacan the subject is always split, as an effect of its imaginary identification with the image of another as the model for itself in the mirror-stage. The subject is incapable of:

...resolving the tension between the fragmentation and disorganization of its lived experiences and the unity, wholeness and totality of the image with which it identifies (Rowley and Grosz, 1990, p.186).

Lacan’s stress on subjectivity rather than ‘ego’ or ‘identity’ resonates with the concerns of later poststructuralists. He is the dominant figure in European reinterpretations of psychoanalysis; moreover, he is also a central figure in the French feminists’ critique of psychoanalysis. In her attempt to recuperate Freud for a feminist critique, Juliet Mitchell makes use of Lacan’s work. She echoes Lacan in criticizing certain aspects of post-Freudian analysis which ignores the unconscious and focuses instead on the development of the child’s ‘personality’ in a specific social environment.

If Mitchell’s work represents one kind of critique (in the sense of reinterpretation) of Freudian psychoanalysis, the work of theorists like Melanie Klein and D.W. Winnicott (who were mostly based in America) represents another. The object-relations theorists conceptualized the subject on a totalized or wholist model. Viewing the subject as an integrated whole, object-relations theorists focus on identity, ego and personality, elements that are dismissed by Lacan as expressive of bourgeois humanism. Analysts like Nancy Chodorow argue that psychoanalysis provides an explanation for reproduction of gender roles, from one generation to another. One of the major preoccupations of Chodorow’s book The Reproduction of Mothering is her analysis of the gender specific transmission of ‘gender roles’, in the child’s primary and formative relation to the mother (Chodorow, 1979).

A significant figure in the feminist critique of psychoanalysis is the American psychoanalyst Carol Gilligan whose book In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development (1982) critiques the phallocentric assumptions of Freud and Erickson and the male-centred developmental psychology of Kohlberg. For Gilligan, difference does not mean inferiority and the trajectory of women’s development focuses on connections among people, rather than separation (as in the male model). Her work, which straddles the domains of psychoanalysis and philosophy, stresses the development of an ethics of care rather than an ethics of justice. Gilligan
looked at the distinction between care and justice perspectives adducing examples of men and women faced with real life dilemmas. Her example of a pregnant woman considering abortion has a feminist orientation. It is concrete rather than abstract, specific rather than universal and brings a new dimension to concepts of self and morality. The psychoanalytic feminists have tried to locate the issue of identity in the structure of gender relations (Benjamin, 1986, p. 82).

In this section, we have looked at feminist perspectives within the discipline of psychoanalysis in general. Below, we will examine the specific contributions of prominent French feminists in attempting a major critique of psychoanalysis. You will also read about other relevant issues raised by some of these theorists in Unit 3 of Block 4 of the course on “Gendered Bodies and Sexualities.”

Check Your Progress

Summarize, in your own words, the interventions made by various feminist critics mentioned above, in the field of psychoanalysis. In what ways did their viewpoints differ from those represented by Sigmund Freud or Jacques Lacan?

3.4.2 French Feminism

The critique of psychoanalysis articulated by the French feminists like Julia Kristeva offers considerable scope for theorization. Kristeva has developed the idea of the ‘semiotic’, which is closely allied with the unconscious, and represents the pre-imaginary, pre-Oedipal and pre-symbolic realm. The semiotic is associated with the maternal and is a counterpoise to the symbolic, which is associated with the paternal (the realm of Lacan’s name-of-the-father). The site of irrational desires, the semiotic is the site of resistance to the symbolic rational discourse. In the words of Gallop and Burke:

“If the semiotic expresses itself in the ‘infants’ world as babble, rhythm, melody and gesture then in the adults world it retires in word play, nonsense and laughter - all relatively uncensored traces of the unconscious” (Gallop and Burke, 1980, p. 120).

Although both the semiotic and the symbolic constitute the subject - whether masculine or feminine - the “semiotic mode is more dominant in the female
Feminist Critiques of Knowledge

psyche”. Further the symbolic is established through the repression of the semiotic, but the latter “re-energises” in the symbolic, challenging and undermining the symbolic (Rowley and Grosz, 1994, p.194).

Another French psychoanalyst whose work offers a feminist critique of knowledge is Luce Irigaray. Her Speculum of the Other Woman analyses the history of western theory from Plato to Hegel. In this tradition the female is reduced to being the “complement, the other side, or the negative side” of the masculine (Irigaray, 1977, p. 63). The most important signifier in this system of representation is the phallus and thus this discourse, of which Freud, according to her, is a proponent, is phallocentric. This mode of discourse cannot accommodate women’s desire. According to Irigaray:

Women’s desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man’s; women’s desire has been submerged by the logic that has dominated the west since the time of the Greeks (Irigaray, 1985, p. 25).

In This Sex which is Not One (1985), Irigaray constructs an “elaborate metaphor” around female sexuality to affirm the “positive potential of sexual difference”. The question of female imaginary is located in feminine sexuality, which is not one but plural, diffuse and polymorphous.

Hélène Cixous also talks of a “feminine writing” (écriture feminine) - writing that questions and subverts the dominant phallogocentric logic. She criticizes Freudian psychoanalysis for its thesis of a “natural anatomical determination of sexual differences-opposition” (Cixous, 1981, p.93). More than the sex of the author, it is writing and “writing from the unconscious” that constitutes her area of interest. Masculine writing is viewed by her as a system closed from the imaginary. In one of her early, and most widely read essays, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ (1975), she articulates a manifesto for feminine writing. Writing, she visualizes, would restore to woman her sexuality, “her goods, her pleasures..., her immensely bodily territories which have been kept under seal” (Cixous, 1981, p. 250).

The work of the French feminists extends the ambit and scope of the psychoanalytic critique and paves the way for the postmodernists in the 1990s and beyond. Feminist critiques of Freudian psychoanalysis dispute the phallocentrism of Freudian theory. Critics like Juliet Mitchell distinguish between a Freud who was ahead of his time and one who was trapped within the dominant scientific paradigms of the late nineteenth century. Similarly the centrality of the phallus as a signifier in the Lacanian interpretation has also been subjected to extended critical scrutiny. Further, the relative positions of the key protagonists in psychoanalysis- that of the
The analyst and the analysed (‘analysand’) - has been critiqued, as a model which perpetuates dominance, control and mastery of one player (the analysts) over the analysed.

The question that lies at the heart of the feminist critiques is similar to the one raised within philosophy: is it possible to free psychoanalysis of its gender biases and its inherited phallocentrism, to make it answer the needs and demands of feminist theory? Or would feminist assumptions have to be modified given the dominance of the established disciplinary frameworks? In the next section, we will approach such questions afresh within the domain of the discipline of literature.

3.5 FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF KNOWLEDGE: LITERATURE

The concept of literature and literary discourse has been under attack both from critical as well as from feminist theory, since canonical literature and literary criticism, as a body of work, is often used to endorse and justify conservative and/or repressive ideologies.

Feminist critiques of knowledge in the field of literature operate in several directions: the first, which came up in the 1970s and the 1980s was the critique of sexism and phallocentrism evident in ‘Literature’, ‘Literary Criticism’ and ‘Literary History’. The second thrust area, which followed from the first, was the recovery of texts by women and an attempt to rewrite literary history and the history(ies) of literary criticism from a changed perspective. One dimension of the feminist critique is a careful reading and critical examination of the mythology and archetypes embedded in the art of the past - works which include both the Indian myths and epics, as well as the works of Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Shakespeare and Milton. By the 1990s, however, the focus had extended beyond the insertion of gender into the categories of analysis to questions of identity and difference, investigations into the nature of self and of language.

In this section on literature, we will analyze the broad contours of feminist critiques as they have reshaped the map of literary studies by the end of the twentieth century. Further, you will also see that the sustained critique and analysis of the issues of social and sexual construction of gender, and the question of identity and language-questions raised by post-structuralist theory, have resulted in the institutionalizing of new areas of study: Gender Studies, Culture Studies and Queer Theory, to mention only a few.
Feminist Critiques of Knowledge

3.4.2 Feminist Critique: Earlier Paradigms

The major branches of academic research and existing knowledge-systems are implicated in the operations of power and ideology. Literature and the “literary canon” which forms the “great tradition” of any “national literature” are recognised as “constructs, fashioned by particular people” for “particular reasons” at a certain time (Eagleton, 1983, p. 290). One of the thrust areas of the feminist critiques to examine the prevalence of patriarchal ideologies and the various forms of discrimination. Further “great traditions” and literary canons are deconstructed to reveal the politics of their construction as well as of their representation and construction of gender.

Moreover, these traditions embody both conscious and unconscious assumptions of phallocentrism and phallogocentrism. Phallocentrism and phallogocentrism, denote the centrality of the ‘phallus’ as a signifier; the latter term indicates the primacy of this key signifier prevalent in literature and other knowledge-systems. Coupled with this inherent phallocentric bias is a species of criticism that can be referred to as ‘phallic criticism’. It is a mode of criticism that is (practised by the male guardians and purveyors of literature) and can be seen “as an intellectual measuring of busts and hips” (Showalter, 1977). Women writers are evaluated as women first, their merits or capabilities as writers come later.

Elaine Showalter’s comments here substantiate the earlier critique of Virginia Woolf (A Room of One’s Own, 1929) and Simone de Beauvoir (The Second Sex, 1949), both of whom focus on women’s exclusion from, and marginalisation in, most meaningful endeavours. Their critiques emphasize the ‘other’(ing) of women in Western civilisation and culture. Thus, Woolf narrates the story of Shakespeare’s imaginary sister whose creative genius is thwarted and ultimately destroyed and which leads her to commit suicide (Woolf, 1929).

The crux of feminist critiques of literature is the androcentric (man-centred) nature of both creative and critical writing as well as the worldview underlying the writing. Feminists critics point out that concepts of tradition, creativity, literary history and literary interpretation based on male experience have been offered as universal and apolitical categories. Ideas of greatness, universality and literariness have been constructed by male critics working in an “androcentric” (Showalter, 1985) tradition in such a way that women writers have been excluded and their efforts obscured and marginalised.
In the 1970s and the early eighties, feminist critics sought to address both the problems of women’s invisibility and the presence of a sexist bias in the field of literature. Thus, Showalter’s attempt to construct a tradition of women’s writing in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) and her later attempt to formulate the ideas of ‘gynocriticism’, based on women’s writings can be seen as a corollary to each other. In delineating the different schools of gynocentric feminist criticism, Showalter mentions four models of difference: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural. Each is an effort to define and differentiate the qualities of women writers and their writings.

Feminist criticism which sees writing as produced by the female body and views “physicality as a source” (Rich, 1976), comes from the insights of the radical feminists, who were mainly based in the U.S. The body in a literal, metaphorical and figurative sense has also been invoked by the French feminists, as you may have already read. However, the feminist critique of the 1990s and after, has questioned biologically based and essentialist models of femininity. The body and bodily difference by the turn of century is no longer a given or a stable signifier, but is constructed in the interstices of sex and gender.

To revert to Elaine Showalter’s framework, Showalter refers to language, its use and practice, as a site of feminine difference. Since language shapes our comprehension of reality, feminist theory draws attention to the “inherently oppressive aspects for women in a male constructed language system” (Furmen, cited in Spender, 1982). Can feminist theory appropriate and subvert this linguistic domination? French feminism attempts to find an answer in “écriture féminine” or ‘feminine discourse’. The challenge for a feminist is to “reinvent” language, to speak “not only against, but outside of the specular phallogocentric structure to establish the status of which would no longer be defined by the phalacy of masculine meaning” (Felman, 1975). Women’s writings as ‘censured’ by man made language is recognised by Showalter when she says that women have been denied “the full resources of language” and have been forced into “silence, euphemism and circumlocution” (Showalter, 1985, p.321).

The attempt to locate difference (in woman’s writing) in the psyche is evident in a broad spectrum of feminist criticism. Both French feminism which is based on psychoanalysis as well as feminist critics like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) trace their interpretation of women’s writing to a sense of psychoanalytic “lack” and look at women writers as disinherit, displaced and excluded.
The idea of ‘women’s culture’ as providing a model for a feminist framework is explored with reference to feminist historians like Gerda Lerner who stress on the importance of a ‘women-centred’ enquiry of the past (Lerner, 1979). A woman-centred criticism must “plot the precise cultural locus of female literary identity” and “describe the forces that intersect a women writer’s cultural field” (Showalter, 1985, p.324). These forces include locations of race, class and other aspects of psycho-social identity. Additionally, gynocentric criticism would also situate women writers with respect to “variables of literary culture, such as mode of production and distribution, relations of author and audience, relations of high to popular art” (Showalter, 1985, p.324). Marxist and socialist feminist critiques, which are especially a marked aspect of British cultural critiques, examine the variables outlined above.

The version of a unified and unitary women’s culture is however deeply problematic to women who fall outside the pale of Showalter’s definition and exploration. This category includes women of colour and third world women whose saga of dispossession, exploitation and torture follow different historical trajectories and thus require a different theorization. The writings of Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Cherie Moraga, Chandra Talpade Mohanty are cases in point. Mohanty points out the coalescing of the category of the third world woman in western scholarship; Gayatri Spivak says that the subaltern cannot speak since she is always already spoken for. You will read more about third world feminist perspectives in the unit on “Postcolonial Feminism” in Block 5.

The silencing and making invisible of women’s writing is pointed out by Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha in their introduction to Women Writing in India (1991), where they foreground the work of hitherto unknown women writers. The question of women’s writing and its exclusion is one facet of the feminist critique which also focuses on questions of representation and construction of women in literary texts, modes of reading and interpretation and questions of gender and genre. Further, the last two decades have witnessed the emergence of a feminist critique informed by poststructuralism. Questions of sex and gender, the nature of identity and difference and the question of language have been posed in a manner so as to effect a radical revision in the way literature is conceptualised.

This transformation is evident in the dismantling of barriers and disciplinary boundaries, on the one hand, and in the reconceptualisation and the revisioning of ‘literature’ as ‘literary studies’ at par with ‘gender studies’, ‘culture studies’ and ‘queer studies’, on the other. Literature is no longer
a ‘grand récit’ or meta-narrative of the best that has been thought and
written in a culture, but a cluster of narratives and writings which are
shaped by the dominant cultural groups, or other emergent groups struggling
for a voice of their own.

**Activity:** Choosing any ‘great work’ of literature that you have read,
try to apply some of the feminist critiques described above to
determine in what ways feminine perspectives may have been excluded
or marginalized in this text. Think about the reasons why this may
have happened. For instance, does it have to do with male biases,
with the time period in which the work was written, with cultural
traditions, or some other reasons? Can you think of other works
where feminine sensibilities are represented more adequately? Try
to analyse why this is so.

### 3.5.2 Reading and Interpretation

The task of a feminist critique is a far-reaching one and extends to more
than cosmetic changes in vocabulary. It is more than replacing a phallocentric
or androcentric tradition with a woman-centred or gynocentric one. Feminist
critiques call for a radical rethinking of the conceptual grounds of literary
study. Part of this transformation, feminist contend, can be brought about
by a change in our ways of reading and interpretation.

If the activity of writing and criticism forms an important arena of political
struggle, so does reading and interpretation. If the woman writer had to
resort to using male pseudonyms, women readers were co-opted into reading
in gender neutral ways. A form of ideological interpellation ensured that
women readers were led to adopt reading strategies which made them
complicit with the world view(s) expressed in the (usually male) text. As
readers, teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to
identify with the male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate
a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny
(Fetterley, 1973).

The feminist critique aimed at revising the canon and developing reading
strategies consonant with the concerns and experiences of women. Such
reading strategies would not make pretensions to objectivity or neutrality,
but would be anchored in subjectivity.

The feminist critique of the seventies also called attention to questions of
representation of women within literary texts. *Kate Millett’s Sexual Politics*
Feminist Critiques of Knowledge

(1969) is a scathing critique of the way great American writers have depicted women in ‘classics’ of American literature. The practice of cultural stereotyping and the reduction of women characters into binaries of Madonnas or angels, on the one hand and whores on the other was critiqued by Millett and Fetterley, who exhorted the reader to adopt resistant strategies of reading.

The task of feminist critique in the early phase was also to draw attention to the way gender is implicated in making a hierarchy of genres. Thus the ‘higher’ classical genres of epic and poetry were inhospitable to women. Women, as many critics point out, did not have the benefits of a classical education which included knowledge of Latin and Greek and thus were automatically debarred from joining the ranks of the ‘great’ poets. Further, the form of the epic enshrined overtly masculine qualities and values of virility and martial prowess. This is true of both the Indian and the Western epics like Homer’s The Iliad and The Odyssey, Virgil’s Aeneid and Milton’s Paradise Lost. Similarly, the Ramayana and Mahabharata, especially the former, represents a valorization of traditional patriarchal values. Interestingly, later versions of the epic which foreground different values are often silenced and marginalised. Nabaneeta Deb Sen discusses the case of Chandrabati Ramayana, a sixteenth century Bengali women’s retelling of the Ramayana, which criticises Rama as a son, husband and father. It foregrounds Sita’s feelings and subjectivity and the story is told from her perspective. Tellingly, it was dismissed as an incomplete fragment by male custodians of Bengali literature. Feminist critiques have also foregrounded genres like the autobiography and romance as distinctly feminine genres which occur at the locus or intersection of female creativity and desire.

The feminist critiques in the late 1980s and 1990s have focused on the impossibility of invoking ‘women’ as an essentialist category of discussion. A series of critiques have pointed out that women are placed differently along a wide spectrum of attributes: class, sexual orientation, race, social location or caste, are only some of them. The work of black feminists, (or ‘womanists’), and ‘third’ world feminists, are some cases in point.

The critique forwarded by poststructuralist feminists does not only point out the impossibility of invoking a unified category of women, but goes further. It questions the fundamental assumptions lying at the heart of gender differentiation, problematizes the distinction between sex and gender and destabilizes notions of character and identity by viewing them as primarily linguistic constructs. Reality is also similarly viewed as a construct mediated by language. Thus, Judith Butler’s analysis of gender as
performance strains at the limits of and destabilizes ideas of gender differentiation. (Butler, 1990). You will read in greater detail about Butler’s work in Unit 3 of Block 4 of the course on “Gendered Bodies and Sexualities”.

As you have seen above, feminist critiques of literature have helped to forge the idea of a feminist aesthetic and a critique (gynocriticism) which attempted to tackle the problems of stereotypical notions of gender in various ways.

3.6 LET US SUM UP

Feminist critiques can be seen as part of a transformative practice where notions of objectivity, neutrality and scientific rationality are revealed as a subterfuge. These critiques also reveal that such notions are often used as a political strategy devised to secure and perpetuate the dominance of patriarchal systems of knowledge and knowing. Knowledge is here envisaged as an entity to be “mastered” objectively and impersonally known. In the above unit, we have attempted to analyze and dismantle the binaries that structure western philosophical thought. You would have also gained some insights into how categories of philosophy like epistemology and logic are implicated in the silencing and/or marginalizing of the feminine. We have also tried to understand some of the ways in which literature and psychoanalysis have been implicated in subversive ideologies of colonialism and patriarchy.

In the last few years, the growth of local, regional and ethnic feminisms have posed a challenge to large universal bodies of knowledge. Looking ahead, we could say that the task of feminist critiques is both to focus on the specific historical unique particulars of subordinated groups, and to entertain the questions raised by gender studies without losing sight of the larger emancipatory project of feminism.

3.7 GLOSSARY

Androcentric : Male-centred.

Biologism : The belief that biology is the only determining factor in deciding sex and gender.

Cognition : Theories to do with acquiring knowledge.

Ethics : Moral philosophy; that branch of philosophy which has to do with morality e.g. moral ethics, legal ethics.
Epistemology: The branch of philosophy which has to do with knowledge.

Gynocriticism: Woman-centred criticism.

Imaginary-Symbolic-Real: For Lacan, the imaginary designates that basic and enduring dimension of experience that is oriented by images, perceived or fantasized. Lacan characterizes the Freudian ‘ego’ as a formation of the imaginary. The symbolic is the register of language and of structure and regulation. The real, for Lacan, is not to be confused with reality: “the real is not synonymous with external reality, but rather with what is real for the subject” (Anthony Wilden, 1981, p.161, quoted in Wolfreys, 2004, p.110-111).

Metaphysics: Theoretical philosophy of being and knowing.

Phallic-Phallogocentric: The symbolic power of male sexuality; the centrality of the same in knowledge systems.

Postmodernism: A way of thinking that is anti-system and expresses a fundamental doubt and skepticism about ultimate meanings; associated with a movement in the latter half of the twentieth century in the arts, literature and culture.

3.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) What are the traditional branches of philosophy? What are the revisions and reformulations suggested by feminist critics?

2) Comment on Freud’s views on differentiation between the sexes? How have his views been modified by French feminists?

3) Examine some aspects of the feminist responses to Freud’s views.

4) Explore the ways in which the feminist critiques have reshaped the domain and concept of literature.

5) In what ways have practices of reading and writing challenged the canons of literature?
3.9 REFERENCES


Feminist Critiques of Knowledge


### 3.10 SUGGESTED READINGS


