
UNIT 1 WAYS OF READING AND INTERPRETING

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

Why do we read literature at all? Of course, some of the most obvious reasons are that we all enjoy a good story, appreciate vivid descriptions and imagery or feel that something that we think and perceive has been well expressed - or we may read even just to pass the time. You may have other reasons to add to this list. But apart from all these, in many ways, the reading of literature equips us with a level of sophistication that enables us to view, compare, analyse and internalise cultural values and relate them to real life situations. We are thus in the position of making an informed choice when confronted with complex dilemmas in our own life.

When we talk about literature, is it possible to ignore language? Literature cannot be divorced from language and, as the poet Robert Frost said in another context, the sensible and sensitive reader would not like to view language and literature as separate entities encased in water tight compartments. What is literature but language that is descriptive - on the one plane of the mental, inner space of ideas and emotions and on the other, the physical spaces of this universe? In this unit we will examine the relationships between gender, language and literature with the help of examples from western and Indian literary histories.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, you will be able to:

- Analyse various issues related to theorising writing by men and women;
- Discuss how men and women use language for communication;
- Explain gender perspectives and biases and their influence on literary criticism; and
- Critically analyse the different gendered perceptions and versions of the literary text.

1.3 PERSPECTIVES FROM LANGUAGE

Even if we'd like to think that language is language after all and how does it matter who is using it, there are those (both literary critics and ordinary readers) who claim that they can spot the differences in the way men and women use language. But we must consider that language varies in the ways it is used as a mode of communication, or talking to anyone. So what we are essentially saying is that it is more important to look at how language is used differently when describing men or women and, more importantly, the ways in which words are used differently when actually communicating with men or women.

When we look at writing, say any literary writing, there are generally two perspectives from which it can be viewed -read and interpreted. One is at the level of language - the grammar, the structure of the sentences, the vocabulary, etc. The other is deeper and probably of greater consequence -the ideas, feelings, concepts that are being expressed. Writing can therefore be dense and simple at the level of language and/or at the level of ideas. You may be wondering, does writing by men and women differ in these two respects? Let us first look at the linguistic component and the various conclusions arrived at over the years.

Check Your Progress 1:

At this point we would encourage you to put down very briefly what you think are the differences in the ways in which people of different genders use language. Do you think that there are any marked characteristics that are specific to a particular gender?

Some conclusions that have been drawn from studies state that there are broadly sixteen language features that appear to differentiate gender in a consistent manner. To state these briefly, investigations have shown that men tend to use more ‘references to quantity’ and employ more ‘judgmental adjectives’. On the other hand, women appear to use more ‘intensive adverbs’ and make more ‘references to emotions’. Women also were seen to use more evasions and extremely polite forms, append tag questions to their statements, emphasise words and phrases in a distinct way through intonation, try to be more correct with regard to grammar and pronunciation. They were seen to lack a sense of humour or inability to tell a joke effectively, and use more empty adjectives (Lakoff, 1973, p. 45-80).

However, in spite of the claims made regarding these differences, other researchers have asserted that they should not be thought of as “markers” of gender whose presence unerringly points to the gender of the speaker. Instead, they function as gender-linked “tendencies” to favour certain linguistic features over others (Mulac & Bradac, 1995, p. 83-104). Although there is widespread agreement among researchers that gender-linked language differences occur in a wide range of communication contexts, (Henley & Kramarae, 1991, p.18-43) a challenge to this view has recently appeared. Canary and Hause argue that meaningful differences in the communication strategies of men and women have not been found with any degree of consistency (Canary and Hause, 1993, p. 141). In various studies that have been conducted, it was found that most language features were used equally by males and females. So, as we can see, the studies appear largely contradictory.

Mulac and his colleagues have demonstrated that the language of men and women leads them to be judged differently on psychological dimensions that are of consequence (Mulac & Bradac, 1995, p. 83-104). The almost universal finding is that readers of brief transcripts of women’s language rate them higher on socio-intellectual status (i.e., higher social status and more literate) and higher on aesthetic quality (more pleasant and beautiful). Men are rated higher on dynamism (stronger and more aggressive).

Does all this sound confusing?! It might be a good idea to stop at this point and then come back and read the previous paragraphs again slowly to get the main thrust of the arguments.

Check Your Progress 2:

It might be helpful, informative and revealing of general attitudes if you were to prepare a questionnaire for friends and family on people's views regarding the language of men and of women. You could have questions like: Who talks more? Who is more assertive? Who is more supportive? Who can convey something humorous or witty in a better way? Who is more convincing? And so on.

Based on the answers to these questions, you can prepare a short report on conceptions of verbal features that are seen to be typical of men and of women. Now try to correlate them with what you think and have observed for yourself as well as what has been said above.

It may perhaps be more accurate to say at this point that language or the ways of using language either through the spoken or the written word, cannot be traced to a woman's or a man's instinct or to a biological cause but can be seen to rise out of various factors like genre, tradition, memory and context. A poem, for instance, would require different language and stylistic devices than a formal letter (an example of language dictated by genre). Also, various forms of communication are traditionally expressed in a certain way with specific linguistic features, regardless of the gender of the speaker/writer - like speaking to an older person, for instance. A person relies to a great extent of memory for language. Depending on what one has learnt in childhood, the schools one has attended, the friends one had and the books one has read etc., every individual has a certain 'set' of vocabulary items which is used creatively for communication. The individual is certainly not restricted by this 'set' but uses it in ways unique to him/her. And of course, the context is an extremely important factor in deciding what one says and the language one uses according to a particular situation. Who is addressing whom and in what circumstances, whether it is formal or informal and so on. All this, in turn, influences the way in which a piece of writing is read and interpreted.

Check Your Progress 3:

Listen carefully to conversations between men, women and a mixed group of men and women. Do you think that these conversations bear out or go against what you/people/linguists have to say? Why do you think the differences, if there are any, exist at all?

Now let us get back to the point where we said that language is important in the sense in which it is used to talk about men or women. There are certain features which point clearly to gender disparity - in pronominal references, verbal labels and other images used to refer to women and the portrayal of women characters in creative literature. For instance, Christianity brought in the concept of 'virgin-whore' into literature, creating characters that were starkly dichotomous. It was the archetype of the good girl versus the bad girl and was modelled on the Biblical figures of the pure Mother Mary and the apparently opposing figure of the wanton woman - the other Mary - Mary Magdalene. Portrayals based on this are still to be found in literature and representations in mass media and forms of popular culture.

While language is often seen to disparage women, it certainly defines them in various ways - for instance, while men are referred to in occupational terms, women are referred to in relational terms (Amit is a teacher, Amita is Ankit's wife etc.) Neutral occupational terms are given female modifiers (woman writer). In addition to this, women's names are prefixed with titles that denote the presence or absence of an authorised relation to a male (Miss, Mrs) while men do not have any such gender-biased prefixes before their names. While 'Ms.' has come into the language in order to correct this discrimination, it has not caught on universally and it does not have any equivalence in regional languages. There are other socio-linguistic markers of inequity like the name of the male coming first (Mr. and Mrs.), changing of surnames and even first names of the woman after marriage, the child carrying on the father's name and so on.

Over the years, the meaning and connotation of many words have changed in the English language, usually at the expense of women as Lakoff observed in studies he conducted (Lakoff, 1973, p. 45-80). Some examples would be: master - mistress; wizard - witch; dog - bitch; fox - vixen; sir - madam etc.

in which the word denoting the feminine gender has acquired pejorative connotations. Objects that are relatively small or insignificant or substitutes are named in a feminine way - kitchenette, leatherette - while the generic term is usually always masculine ('mankind has taken enormous technological strides'; 'the tiger is an endangered species'). Male-centred categorisations predominate in most languages and they subtly influence our understanding and perception of reality.

Have you ever noticed that most insults target women even when they are directed at men? In particular, sexual insults always refer to the man's female relations in a derogatory and offensive manner.

It must be quite obvious to you by now that language practices accomplish gender. Language and identity are crucially interwoven and we can and must make language choices in terms of who we want to be or, perhaps more importantly, who we want to be perceived as. It is important to be aware and sensitive enough to see how words resonate with meaning and to make a conscious, empowered choice to choose language that becomes an index of our identity and thus make sure that we become not victims of language, but agents.

Let us now take a look at previous opinions about writing by women. Concepts of creativity, literary history or literary interpretation were, for a long time, and still, in some measure continue to be, based entirely on male experience and put forward as universal.

Box 1.1

Activity 1: Keeping in mind what has been said, make a list of words in your mother tongue that uses the masculine gender to denote superiority and the feminine gender in a derogative way.

1.4 PERSPECTIVES FROM LITERATURE

Women writers are often taken less seriously than their male counterparts. Is the difference to do with style, genre or experience? Some textual critics assert that the difference is perceived by the reading experience. The perspectives from which we read can be from the biological, linguistic, psychoanalytical or cultural perspectives.

Victorian physicians believed that women's physiological functions divert 20% of their creative energy from brain activity. Victorian anthropologists thought that the frontal lobes of the brain were heavier and better developed in men and so women were less intelligent.

Women writers have been compelled to reinvent language so that they can communicate in ways that are not dependent on the dominant discourse and which do not rely overly much on masculine meaning and connotation. Adrienne Rich puts it well when she says that “if the imagination is to transcend and transform experience, it has to question, to challenge, to conceive the alternative, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment. You have to be free to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate; nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call experimentally by another name. For writing is re-naming” (Rich, 1992, p. 503).

Another critic, Mary P. Hiatt says that although ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ are terms that are ostensibly used to denote the styles of writing (of men and women), what they actually do is illustrate the male perspective of both men and women. She offers examples such as descriptions like “strong,” “rational,” and “logical” for men, and “emotional,” “hysterical,” and “silly” for women (Hiatt, 1978, p. 222). So we can say that the primary goal of feminism in composition studies was to fashion a space where women could view themselves intellectually and where their voices could resonate with meaning. In a patriarchal society, sexual politics often determine what gets written and what is valued in the anthropological canon.

Hélène Cixous feels that “it is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded - which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist” (Cixous, 1976, p. 883). Lisa Tuttle defines feminist theory as asking “new questions of old texts.” She cites the goals of feminist criticism as: (i) to develop and uncover a female tradition of writing (ii) to interpret symbolism of women’s writing so that it will not be lost or ignored by the male point of view (iii) to rediscover old texts (iv) to analyse women writers and their writings from a female perspective (v) to resist sexism in literature (vi) to increase awareness of the sexual politics of language and style (Tuttle, 1986, p. 184).

Literature has always had a strong focus on gender issues right from the time of Sappho and Homer who wrote about marriage, relationships between women and their families and female sexuality. Philosophers also discussed the role of women in society, often in disparaging terms. It was during the Victorian era, with the emergence of the notion of women’s rights and the publication of more and more women’s writing that the contours of literary mindsets as related to women came to be refigured. There were extremes: on one hand was the notion of woman as angel that assigned to her the roles of companion, keeper of the home and hearth and conscience keeper to society. On the other hand was the new woman who, gradually realising that she could have some measure of freedom and a role over and above what had been prescribed so far, demanded that she be given the opportunity

to educate herself, to vote, to have a career and to lead a single life if she so wished. This figure was generally looked upon with suspicion, and a blot on 'respectable' society. Both kinds of stereotypes are to be found in Victorian literature and were read and judged according to the prevailing mindset.

With the advent of Freud and his concepts of castration anxiety, penis envy etc., literature written by or about women assumed different dimensions (Freud, 1932, p. 281-97). Freudian ideas, though denounced by later feminists as misogynistic and as a reflection of his own insecurities, did however colour Western perceptions of women in literature to a great degree.

Literature from Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia and Africa and also African American literature - both by women and about women - while talking about issues that other writing has dwelt on, also addresses basic issues that directly touch women's lives such as slavery and colonisation. Today, with women's emancipation so clearly established in a number of societies in varying degrees, literature more and more depicts the changing face of women's roles and activities and the still existent barriers on their path to self-actualisation.

1.5 REWRITING AND REFRAMING

The revising, rewriting and reframing of texts that have long been considered as classics, as part of the canon, is a way of presenting a counterpoint to the prevailing male voice. They can thus be said to be new ways of reading and interpreting texts. The telling of a story from another point of view can be seen as an attempt to explore and perhaps bridge, the spaces and silences in a text in order to give voice to the hitherto ignored. Writing has always been regarded as a strong form of control - culturally and morally - so the rewriting and reframing of texts that featured male superiority at their core can be viewed as an act of liberation for those who were depicted as subordinate or inferior. George Egerton says that "I realised that in literature, everything had been better done by man than woman could hope to emulate. There was only one small plot left for her to tell; the *terra incognita* of herself, as she knew herself to be, not as man liked to imagine her—in a word to give herself away, as man had given himself in his writing" (Gawsworth, 1972, p. 58).

Revisions of literary texts from the point of view of the voiceless (usually a woman) may not necessarily be by women, as we shall see later in this section. But all such revisions and retellings can be said to feature one or all of the following:

The text so revised and rewritten is inevitably oppositional; it questions and regenerates the established text; it fleshes out, extends and gives an added

dimension to the female character(s) who have been portrayed as inferior or have been relegated to a position of neglect; it challenges the authority of the prevailing text.

Check your Progress 4:

Look at any familiar text/ story you have read or heard without really thinking about the way in which the female character has been portrayed. If the character is shown as meek and subservient, inhabiting a world that is ruled by men and with no voice of her own to protest against indignities she is subjected to, how can the story be told differently with the framework given above?

Let us now look at some examples of western literary texts that have been re-told from the perspective of one of the female characters.

1.5.1 Literature of the West

Literature is replete with female characters like the mad Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre* or the enigmatic lady in white with whose escape from an insane asylum Wilkie Collins's book of the same name takes off or Gustave Flaubert's delusional Emma in *Madame Bovary*, to name a few. But many people would question if they were really mad or mentally imbalanced when viewed from today's perspective or whether they were women who were grossly misunderstood by the society of that time or were misfits in that world and hence termed insane. They may today be considered to be women with strongly independent or 'liberated' values - hence an embarrassment to their families and the strait-laced notions concerning women at that time - and condemned to be locked away out of sight in attics or asylums or to be driven mad by society, as much of the criticism points out.

In the Victorian age, the number of women confined to mental asylums was far greater than that of men. There were many others who were pushed away out of sight like Bertha and kept in dingy attics in secret as insanity was somehow considered to be a taint on the family reputation. What exactly constituted insanity at that time? It could be female behaviour that

did not conform to the norms of the time and which seemed to be too unrestrained, too free and sexually uninhibited. "Attics are where wives who cannot be contained, who are over-sexualised and unruly are stored away," says writer and psychotherapist, Adam Phillips (Phillips, April 20, 2010, BBC Interview).

When Jean Rhys read *Jane Eyre* as a child, the character of Bertha Mason touched her and she thought she would give Bertha a 'life' and she did just that in her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In the book, she tells the story of Antoinette Cosway, a Creole heiress who grew up in the West Indies, is married off to an Englishman and is taken away from her home to England. He also gives her a new name - Bertha - thus completely obliterating all links with her past. In this novel, Rhys' Antoinette creates a haunting new dimension to Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha is a voiceless character who, even if she had not been insane in the first place, might very easily have turned so given the fact that she was locked up with the alcohol-sodden Grace all the time. Rhys tells the story that Bronte did not - of the mad woman in the attic - and constructs an explanatory narrative both from Bertha's point of view and Rochester's as well. She thus turns Bronte's classic inside out and offers a critical view of the power of patriarchy as manifested in marital bonds and the societal controls that support gender inequality.

It is noteworthy that Rochester, who plays such a huge role in Bronte's book and in Bertha's life, is not named in Rhys's book. Gayatri Spivak observes, "Rhys denies to Bronte's Rochester the one thing that is supposed to be secured in the Oedipal relay: the Name of the Father, or the patronymic. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the character corresponding to Rochester has no name" (Spivak, 1985, p.252). Since *Jane Eyre* was already a canonical text when Rhys wrote her book, the trajectory of Antoinette's life would have to have been more or less similar to Bronte's Bertha. However, there is one significant difference where the end is concerned: while Bronte's character sets the house on fire and perishes in the flames, Rhys's Antoinette dreams of the fire and of leaping to her death but the novel ends there without a description of her death but only with her resolution to act. By leaving it open-ended, Rhys lets the reader imagine that the character may have a different fate from that of Bronte's Bertha, therefore extending the possibilities of the earlier text.

In *Mama Day*, published in 1993, Gloria Naylor's revision of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Naylor names her main character Miranda. Thus, she shifts the focus from Prospero in Shakespeare's play to the daughter, one of the least empowered characters in the original. And, if Prospero had been the one to instruct his daughter and lay down the law, in Naylor's text, Miranda is a matriarch who rules over not only her household but the island too and takes on the might of corporate giants to boot. Naylor's *Miranda Day*,

George, and Ruby closely parallel Shakespeare's Caliban, Prospero, Miranda, and Alonso. By portraying powerful black women, Naylor makes use of a classic Shakespeare play to assert racial and sexual differences and question the system of white European patriarchy in *The Tempest*.

We can find similar examples of revisionary literary texts in India. Let us turn to some of these in the next section

1.5.2 Literature of India

In *Saba Vimosanam*, a Tamil story, published in 1943, Pudhumaipittan takes up the story of Ahilya from where it is left off in the Ramayana. Once she is free of the curse and has turned back into a woman, she and her husband, the Rishi Gautama take up the reins of their household once again, trying to forget the past and forge new bonds of togetherness with each other. When Rama returns victorious from Lanka, he comes to their ashram, accompanied by Sita who tells Ahilya in a very matter-of-fact manner, about her trial by fire - the *agni pariksha*. Ahilya is horrified and asks her why she submitted to such a thing to which Sita replies that Rama had asked her to do so. Interestingly enough, Ahilya poses a question to Sita twice: did *he* ask you to do this? The first time she does so, she uses the respectful honorific (the pronoun prevalent in most Indian languages to denote the third person 'he' when referring to someone elderly or highly respected) for Rama but the second time, after Sita confirms that he did indeed ask her to, Ahilya makes use of the ordinary honorific. Thus, within the space of a sentence, and by just changing the pronoun, the author conveys how Ahilya's respect - bordering on worship - for Rama comes crashing down. She then turns voluntarily back into stone as a protest against the victimisation of women and their humiliation in a patriarchal society. Her gesture is meant to indicate that she'd rather be an inanimate object than a woman inhabiting such a heartless society. Pudhumaipittan thus re tells the myth from another perspective and questions the patriarchal concepts of purity and chastity.

In the Hindi poem, *Saket*, published in 2008, in *Granthavali* Vol. 4, Maithili Sharan Gupta looks at the sequence of events in the Ramayana from the perspective of Urmila, Lakshmana's wife who is left behind in Ayodhya while Rama, Lakshmana and Sita go away to the forest for fourteen years. In this work (which can be described as a good example of alternate histories), we hear Urmila speaking about what it is like to be in Ayodhya without the three celebrated characters. In the paeans sung in praise of the ideal brother, Lakshmana, where is the song for Urmila? Why is she not celebrated as the ideal wife? Maithili Sharan Gupta's verse is an attempt to bring her into our field of awareness and foreground her point of view. In doing so, he gives voice to someone who has been silenced and perhaps all but forgotten in our collective consciousness.

Another poem published in 2008 in *Granthavali* Vol. 5, by Maithili Sharan Gupta, *Sakhi Ve Mujhse Keh Kar to Jaate*, is a plaintive statement by Yashodhara, wife of Prince Siddhartha (later Gautama Buddha) of the fact of his having left her and their son without a word while they were sleeping. How shattering must it have been to her when she discovered that her husband had stolen away under the cover of darkness without a word of goodbye to her?! In an era when women were entirely dependent on their husbands and when their very existence was justified only if they had one living, what would this desertion have meant to her? She wonders whether he had thought that she might have stopped him but counters it by saying that women readily prepare and send their men off to war so then why would she have made an exception in this case and tried to stand in the way of his quest for Truth? Gupta's short but touchingly effective poem draws a sketch of Yashodhara as a strong woman who voices her anguish and drives home the point of being a partner in the relationship who, if not consulted, should have been at least told about her husband's decision. The poem highlights the fact that, Gautama Buddha, for all his wisdom and philosophy and enlightenment, if seen from Yashodhara's perspective, was yet a man who simply left his home and went away without telling his wife.

The Australian poet, Kate Llewellyn's poem, *Penelope*, published in 1987, is a witty reply to fellow Australian, AD Hope's *The End of the Journey*, his own re-telling of the Ulysses myth where he describes the doughty warrior, now returned home, as 'an old man sleeping with his housekeeper'. Penelope, his wife, is an old woman too now and as he looks around his island home, he wonders whether this was what he had resisted the call of the sirens for. But what of Penelope - the epitome of the faithful wife - left behind for years together while her husband-king roams the farthest corners of the globe, never knowing when he would return or indeed if he would return at all?

All our epics abound with descriptions of adventurous gallants and the saga of their journeys; not one makes the attempt to plumb the depths of the emotions of the women left behind. Kate Llewellyn describes the feelings of Penelope during all the years of his absence and then her reactions on his return. In this poem, Penelope is an older woman with a mind of her own, capable of self-analysis and understanding. The point that Llewellyn very clearly and unequivocally makes is that Penelope had remained faithful not out of overwhelming love for her absent husband but because of her reluctance to cross the strict standards (albeit double) set by society in a world in which men have all the rights and women all the duties.

It is important to remember - as can be seen by the above illustrations - that such revisions or revisiting of canonical texts or established stories have been done by both men and women and have not been the sole prerogative of women alone. *Jane Eyre* for instance, was written by a

woman and reframed by another as *Wide Sargasso Sea* while Maithili Sharan Gupta and Pudhumaipitthan (both men) have retold or presented stories and situations from a woman's point of view.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have seen how language can be used to define or shape gender and how it is often used as an instrument to assert dominance over a particular group or relegate it to inferiority. Language can also be used in literature to convey abstractions of thought and feeling through sometimes just a single word.

There have been numerous theories about the use of language by men and women but so far none of them have been proved conclusively when actual speaking and writing practices by the different genders have been surveyed. While some theorists were of the view that physical or biological differences accounted for the different ways in which men and women use language, others held that they were inherently 'programmed' to use language differently.

Writing by women was also not taken seriously as it was felt that women did not perhaps have the same level of intellectual calibre required to create a profound or substantial piece of writing. This was probably what prompted some women to assume male pseudonyms - the most notable of them being George Eliot and George Sand.

Writing of canonical texts or re-telling a familiar story from a different perspective - usually that of a neglected or maligned female character in the original narrative - is an exercise that has been performed by both men and women. In most cases, the revision revitalises the original and affords a fresh or novel way of looking at a familiar situation from another point of view. It serves to remove stereotypes established by a patriarchal mindset and forces the reader to question and evaluate accepted notions of 'good' and 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong'.

1.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) What are the prominent theories regarding the use of language by men and women?
- 2) How were physiological factors supposedly responsible for various patterns of language use?
- 3) What are the features of language that reveal a marked bias against women?
- 4) What did women feel that they needed to express through their writing?

- 5) How does the reframing or re-telling of myths and stories help to furnish the female perspective? Use examples from both western and Indian literary traditions to illustrate your response.

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