Gender and Literature

Module Details

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Content Outline

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1. Learning Objectives
   The students will be able to:
   - Critically engage with the prominent debates around the issues of gender and its interaction with literary practices
   - to ideate a critical awareness about gender roles and diversity
   - Identify and evaluate gendered practices in literature
   - Engage with the prominent concerns regarding gender both from a Eurocentric and a postcolonial context
2. Introduction

The previous units in their capacities have dealt with the differences between what we understand as sex as opposed to gender. Simply speaking, gender is a socio-historically constructed phenomenon as opposed to biological sex. One should be reminded that these estimates are themselves not constant; on the contrary, such socio-historical processes have evolved over time and space to constantly manipulate the understanding of what constitutes ‘male’, ‘female’ and the third gender. In this we borrow directly from the second wave feminist theorists who believed as Simone de Beauvoir put it, “one is not born a woman, but becomes one”. Ideally, courses about gendered subjects and/or gendering of subjects should include ideas of masculinity, femininity and the third gender. With the basic premise of gendering of subjects in mind, in this unit, we shall concentrate particularly on the nature of production of female subjects and subjectivities and in extension, what we can call gendered subjects in literature. One of the important constituents of negotiations around gendering are forms of cultural practices that include visual, oral, aural and the literary. These often interlinked practices promote certain constructions of identity and stimulate particular forms of gender subordination. As we shall see in the course of our discussion, the processes of production, dissemination and reception of these cultural forms help frame gender roles. If we are to gauge the complexity of the relationship between gender and literature, we have to concentrate equally on women authors, women represented by men and the reception aesthetics of these literary productions. Given that feminist theorists like Helene Cixous have pointed out that women essentially function within the limits of a patriarchal language (phallogocentric) and that l’écriture feminine is always a struggle to break out from these impositions, we might not be able to find desired results if we take such writings at their face value. Often literature by women even when it appears to have adhered to the norms of patriarchal literary production offers insights into female perspectives and can well lead us to examine how women often took recourse to modes of subversion. Alternatively, one could also identify certain motifs, symbols and themes as well as challenges to other stereotypical representations in their writings as a suitable entry point to reading literature by women.
One way of introducing women’s literature is to chronologically trace women writers and their works. This gives rise to problems of continuity as discernable women writers are often sporadic and do not necessarily conform to the literary and social movements that have defined periods in western and Indian literatures. A case in point might be the ambitious project that Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha had undertaken to recover a 2600 year old almost unbroken history of women’s writing. In doing so, they rejected hierarchies of writing that patriarchal literary histories have often taken recourse to. Unlike standard practices of understanding literary movements via printed classics, Tharu and Lalitha relied on unpublished manuscripts, oral stories, folk retellings, autobiographies and newsprint. Read according to Tharu and Lalitha these varied pieces of women’s writing archived not only highlight their identity politics as the excluded ‘other’, but in more ways than one challenge strict patriarchal notions about authorship, writing and generic formulations.

3. **Women represented by men vs women represented by women**

In relation to some of our preliminary observations, we can move to estimate that representation of any kind is never without motivation. Any sort of representation and in particular in the written medium involves participating in the production of knowledge. Now extending Michel Foucault’s argument we can well comment that there is an intimate relationship between power and knowledge. We need to remember that power does not necessarily present itself in the domain of knowledge in the most obvious ways. Which can then lead us to question how is knowledge about female subjects produced?

According to Stuart Hall, culture and language are agents through which meaning making takes place and “[t]he embodying of concepts, ideas and emotions in a symbolic form which can be transmitted and meaningfully interpreted is what we mean by ‘practices of representation’”. The representation is never complete unless it circulates within a cultural circuit where the meaning can be intelligibly decoded. In the case of gendering, representations have often to play to the tune of the dominant male culture by various means like essentialising women, setting women outside the domain of any significant decision making process or idealizing women in certain roles so as to potentially take away their agency etc. As Adrienne Rich has aptly demonstrated, such representations present themselves through ‘specters of male judgement’ which not only dictate the normative but also the departure from the norm. Women in the ‘masculine consciousness’ appear as muses but rarely inform the literary outcome.

Women in representing themselves have challenged such representations either by directly overturning such mandates or resorting to subverting them.
A case in point might be how Victorian England constructed notions of femininity. As Kathryn Hughes has beautifully demonstrated, the notions of ideal behavior for women were promoted in popular texts to restrict women to their domestic spaces. She notes that conduct books, advisories etc. based on natural characteristics concentrated on promoting what she calls ‘the ideology of separate spheres’. Women were believed to be physically weaker but morally superior counterbalancing their husbands ‘moral taint of the public sphere’. This argument was then taken to its logical extreme by denying women their voting rights. Idealized roles for women meant that they were supposed to be what was known as ‘the Angel in the House’.

The most popular literary form of the period, the Victorian novel often written by women, responded to these concerns and representations. One of the most successful writers of the period, Jane Austen, ridiculed these superficial notions by putting these ideals in the mouth of one of the snootiest and reprehensible characters in the novel Pride and Prejudice:

A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages... and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions.

Almost a hundred years later, Sylvia Plath, one of the most important poets of the twentieth century would lament in her novel Bell Jar, that women’s choices were limited by social expectations:

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn’t quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn’t make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet.
As a confessional mode of writing, Plath’s articulation captures the inability of women to break into the league of writers. The obvious biblical reference to fig tree (Adam and Eve covered themselves in fig leaves after their fall) refers to the ‘original sin’ and the destined suffering thereby. Plath is forced to ‘starve to death’ as she had to choose one and lose the rest. Her creative spirit here is bound by the numerous roles that society has possibly set for her and a new model of self-fashioning is beyond the reaches of a woman.

These examples give us a glimpse of how women often have complex reactions to their projected gender roles. In their critiques, they have constantly sought to challenge fixed gender roles assigned to them by the dominant patriarchal culture. These questions have also presented certain formal questions. For instance, how do women write in gendered genres? Certain genres have often been exclusively associated with women such as romantic fictions, confessional poetry, diaries, chick lit etc. As it opens avenues for women to explore their subjectivities in more individualized genres that have been associated with them, their reception also points to potentially problematic questions of the idea of ‘female texts’.

4. **Women and the literary canon**

As a woman writer walking down imagined libraries in England, Virginia Woolf in _A Room of One’s Own_ (1929) laments the lack of women writers down the ages where there seems to have been numerous illustrious male writers. Working around the absence she wonders why women authors have been historically absent from the library stacks. She envisions that if Shakespeare would have had a sister named Judith she would have had a very different life from her celebrated brother:

She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil. She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother’s perhaps, and read a few pages. But then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers.

She concludes by observing that given the conditions requisite for literary pursuits “it would have been impossible, completely and entirely, for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare.” Historically speaking the social conditions for women were often not conducive to producing great literature. Despite these social struggles when women wrote, their writings were not adequately archived and definitely not studied as great canonical literature.
The word canon has ecclesiastical origins where canonical denoted divine authority. Similarly, in the literary context the term canon came to be identified with texts that were set apart because of their literary quality and importance. By the twentieth century, debates surrounding the canon came to be more defined as universities privileged certain literary works over the others thereby proclaiming the constituents of a literary canon. By no means the first critic to have attempted to construct a canon in the history of English literature, F. R. Leavis for instance tried to formally announce the novelistic canon in his book The Great Tradition. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that texts tend to move towards canonization when time-bound norms and conditions come to be hardened and taken as universal. The process of canon formation is based on a tacit consensus which is subject to social processes. Given that the politics of power has often dictated the machinations concerning the formalization of a canon, it is no wonder that in the case of the Western literary canon it was often the white European male whose opinion mattered. With reference to the quotation by Virginia Woolf we can well estimate that women were almost always absent from this canon.

Elaine Showalter has suggested what she calls ‘gynocriticism’ to illuminate the otherwise neglected domains of women’s writing. In A Literature of their Own (1977) she suggests that women as writers should be studied very differently from men. She introduced a broad range of methodological devices. The subjects were “the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psycho-dynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition”. Therefore, gynocriticism does not merely intend to fill the gaps in the dominant male literary historiography but by using new methods of enquiry possibly encourage alternative canons.

5. Indian literature and women
Our discussion until now might have given us to believe that women’s concerns vis-à-vis writing can be mapped with a broad stroke across the world. However, studies have shown that women’s concerns are varied and defined by their own political, social and historical parameters. Class, caste, race and ethnicities among others often term the ways in which women understand their identity. A white Victorian woman fighting patriarchy might not necessarily face the same challenges as a zenana woman in nineteenth century British India. On the contrary as political opponents (colonizer/colonized) they are likely to have very different positions. Chandra Talpade Mohanty has convincingly argued in this vein to highlight how the hegemonic practices in the west continue to construct the notion of the third world woman. We could use such a postcolonial lens as a point of entry to understand the process of gendering where colonialism and patriarchy meet.
Given India’s sustained apathy towards recognizing female voices, finding speaking female subjects has been one of the many challenges that literary theoreticians in India face. A particularly prolonged colonial rule meant that India was seen as a laboratory for western modernity. In India colonial modernity has played a key role in imagining gender roles and redefining the texture of patriarchies. Traditional attitudes towards women and the exposure to western modernity set very interesting modes of expression in India in the nineteenth century. On the one hand, riding on the fruits of social reform, women were getting educated, moving out from their inner quarters and on the other hand, they were constantly ridiculed and derided for becoming the ‘new woman’ or ‘nabina’ (often modelled on the white woman).

Women’s literature has often been associated with life writing and confessional modes of writing. Both in the case of confessional writing and autobiography there was a greater possibility of self-fashioning. A case in point might be the first ever autobiography by an Indian woman, Rassundari Devi’s Amar Jibon or My Life (1868). Tanika Sarkar in her discussion of the text points out how Rassundari Devi combined elements of medieval spiritual literature and the modern genre of autobiography to legitimize her transgressions. Her desire to read and write (forbidden by the Hindu orthodoxy), her problematisation of the schema sansar or the household were wrapped strategically under the garb of divine intervention. In terms of some unique narrative choices, she carefully shuns self-aggrandizement and opts for third person observations about herself and continuously uses multi-intentioned but seemingly innocent statements. Therefore, the garb of a demure conformist housewife was used to launch an early woman author “engaged in the highly public, audacious act of writing about her life”.

Devi’s attempt though unique finds resonances across genres. Nabaneeta Deb Sen takes up the case of Chandrabati Ramayana to illustrate how urban male literary historians have easily dismissed the retelling of the Ramayana by a village woman of sixteenth century rural Bengal as fragmentary and not worthy of any academic attention. Written from a female perspective without the spotlight on Rama, this retelling differed significantly both in form and in content from the two pillars of what she calls the great tradition (Sanskrit) and the little tradition (Bengali) of the Ramayana by Valmiki and Krittibas respectively, “[it] is no wonder that this text has been silenced by the urban literate male mediators in the role of literary historians.”
Shifting from generic expectations to content driven analysis we can also possibly look at different themes and ways of treating them that Indian women have used over centuries. For instance, A.K. Ramanujan looks for speaking subjects and picks a popular kannada tale ‘the flowering tree’ as his point of departure. He observes that for most part traditional male-centric narratives revolve around the coming of age of the hero “[w]here men are protagonists, especially in tales of quest, women are secondary: they are usually part of the prize, along with half a kingdom; sometimes they help the hero in his quest for the magic flower…” and typically end in marriage. However, in the case of women’s tales the narrative often begins after marriage when the power centers have been suitably altered. Women leverage their traditional roles only to suitably subvert them.

6. Summary
Notions of gendering have historically influenced the production, dissemination, consumption and dissemination of literature. Women have argued that they have been consciously left out of the canon or so called the legions of the great literatures of the world. Their grudging admission into the hallowed domains of great literature also does not do adequate justice to the way they are read. The methodological tools used for academic inquiry into the literary practices are inadequate to estimate women’s writing. In terms of generic formulations, images, themes, subjects, perspectives, language etc, women’s writing have an algorithm of their own and they have to be evaluated on their own terms. Having said that one should be critically aware so as not to essentialise women’s writing. Writing by women have to be simultaneously read as products of their historical, social, political and economic concerns. Therefore, gender concerns in literary practices should reflect the multiple female identities.