

# Women's Writing

**COURSE CODE: M21EG06DE**

Postgraduate Programme in English  
Discipline Specific Elective Course

*Serendipity*  
by Anna Ditman

SELF  
LEARNING  
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The State University for Education, Training and Research in Blended Format, Kerala

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**Women's Writing**  
Course Code: M21EG06DE  
Semester - IV

**Discipline Specific Elective Course**  
**Postgraduate Programme**  
**English Language and Literature**  
**Self Learning Material**  
(With Model Question Paper Sets)



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MA English



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Regards,  
Dr. Jagathy Raj V. P.

01-09-2024

# Contents

<b>Block 01</b>	<b>Introduction to Women's Writing</b>	<b>1</b>
Unit 1	Introduction to Women's Writing and Feminism	2
Unit 2	Four Waves of Feminism	20
<b>Block 02</b>	<b>Poetry</b>	<b>32</b>
Unit 1	Poetry - I	33
Unit 2	Poetry - II	58
<b>Block 03</b>	<b>Prose</b>	<b>80</b>
Unit 1	Introduction to A Vindication of the Rights of Woman - Mary Wollstonecraft	81
Unit 2	We Should All Be Feminists (TED Talk) - Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie	97
Unit 3	"Translation, Colonialism and Rise of English" - Tejaswini Niranjana	111
Unit 4	"Good Souls" - Dorothy Parker	123
<b>Block 04</b>	<b>Fiction and Drama</b>	<b>135</b>
Unit 1	Fiction	136
Unit 2	Short Story	157
Unit 3	Drama	176
	<b>Model Question Paper Sets</b>	<b>193</b>

# Introduction to Women's Writing

## BLOCK-01

### Block Content

Unit 1 : Introduction to Women's Writing and Feminism

Unit 2 : Four Waves of Feminism

## Unit 1

# Introduction to Women's Writing and Feminism

## Outcomes

Upon the completion of the unit, the learners will be able to:

- ▶ define some of the key features of the genre of women's writing
- ▶ identify some of the major women writers from across the world
- ▶ familiarise themselves with the politics and aesthetics of women's writing
- ▶ form an understanding of some of the major branches of non-mainstream feminism

## Background

The genre of women's writing is a vast and varied body of literature that reflects the experiences, struggles, and perspectives of women across myriad cultures and spaces. Historically, women's voices have been marginalised in literary canons, with more aesthetic and cultural significance given to male authors and patriarchal narratives. However, women have always expressed their individuality, challenged societal norms, and advocated for change using the medium of literature. From the medieval poetry of Christine de Pizan to the revolutionary writings of Arundhati Roy, a long tradition of women's writings can be traced. This long line of writings are intertwined with the histories and struggles of women who have been excluded from mainstream accounts, providing an alternative perspective that is crucial for understanding the complexities of gender relations.

Further, women's writings also serve as a repository of collective memory and resistance. Studying women's writings in academia helps rectify historical biases by bringing attention to voices that have been traditionally silenced. This inclusion offers a more comprehensive understanding of cultural and social history. In addition, analysing women's writings opens up questions about normative assumptions surrounding gender, power, and identity. It also cultivates appreciation for the contributions of women in shaping literature and society.

It is equally important to understand women's writings as a crucial feminist strategy,

becoming a vehicle for women to assert agency, reclaim narratives, and drive change. Feminist writers address issues such as gender discrimination, reproductive rights, and sexual autonomy, among other topics which are central to feminist movements. The current unit offers an introduction to the genre of women's writings and feminisms, providing key insights into either category.

## Keywords

Women's writings, Gender, Feminisms, Patriarchy, Ecriture Feminine, Literary History, Women of Colour

## Discussion

### 1.1.1 Introduction and Definition

Women's writings have a history that goes back to the Middle Ages. This was largely in the form of diaries, autobiographies, letters, protests, stories, and poems across the world. These narratives were made distinct by the fact that the experiences mentioned in them were rarely touched upon or were depicted in different ways by male writers. Topics such as housework, childbirth, female friendships, familial relationships, and social norms within women's writings were portrayed as rich, diverse life experiences, as opposed to their one-dimensional depiction by male writers. Women writers offered new and refreshing takes on their identities as women, wives, mothers, widows, lovers, workers, thinkers, and rebels. They also presented their experiences in their writing, emphasising the struggles and discrimination they faced.

► Women's writings as a distinct genre

► New tradition for women's writings

Writing was not considered an acceptable career or profession for women for most of history. It was typically not considered to be an aspect of female experience or an expression of it. The industries associated with writing such as critiquing, publishing, academia, and patronage were dominated by men, pushing women writers to the peripheries of writing and intellectual circles. In fact, the literary scene in the western world did not open itself to women until the

mid-eighteenth century. Still writing was recognised as a profession for women only in the 1840s. This might be because, as suggested by the British thinker John Stuart Mill, women would have to struggle to overcome the male literary tradition. The accepted models and styles in literary creation were constructed by males and literary tastes were shaped by a patriarchal culture. Therefore, women will have to define and develop a new literary tradition that does justice to their lives and experiences.

In this sense, women's writings may be seen as part of a female subculture. Nancy Cott, a historian, discusses the development of such a subculture in the introduction to her work, *Root of Bitterness*. She submits that women's group consciousness is a subculture that is divided against itself by the nature of its connections to the dominant patriarchal culture. On the one hand, images of the "perfect lady" and the "angel in the house" were prevalent in shaping cultural notions about what women could achieve and become; it was considered proper for women to serve their families as homemakers and to serve socially as nurses, governesses, teachers, helpers, and so on. They were to be submissive to their male relatives (fathers, husbands) and to fetishise inner/physical purity. Experiences of the female subculture, which included puberty, menstruation, sex, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause, could not be openly discussed or narrativised in public. Rather, these uniquely female/feminine experiences were referred to only among women or in public using metaphors or coded language.

► Hidden experiences

Being a professional writer then required women to break the norms of the age. Many women published anonymously or under male pseudonyms. This seems to be an indication that women themselves were conditioned to view writing as a vocation that was 'unwomanly'. Yet, once they published as women writers, they were faced with harsh criticism and condescension of their male counterparts and critics. There was also the possibility of preferential treatment where the public would relegate women's literary productions as lacking merit and being a sub-genre. Since literature was a symbol of cultural achievement and capital, women writers found themselves having to compete for a place in the literary tradition.

► Cultural reception

### 1.1.2 Emergence as a Genre

One of the most widely acknowledged theories of the evolution of women's writing is the one suggested by Elaine

► Phases of women's writings

Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own*. Showalter has argued that a female literary tradition exists and it is still forming as part of the ever-changing relationships between women writers and the world around them. As with many other literary subcultures, women's writings or the female literary tradition can be classified into major phases. The first phase in its development may be understood as one where "prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, its standards of art and views on social roles are imitated by women." The second phase is marked by protests against discriminating standards and values, and the advocacy of women's minority rights and values. The third phase privileges "self-discovery", wherein the writers enter into a search for identity as distinct from other subcultures and traditions. Showalter identifies these phases as Feminine phase, Feminist phase, and Female phase in the evolution of the western canon of women's writings.

► Justifying the choice to write

Indeed, the development and growth of women's writings as a genre in English broadly follows the phases defined by Showalter. Early women's writings often strategised different ways to deal with the choice of taking up writing as a vocation. Many of them expressed a sense of self-deprecation as writers and women, often exalting their status as submissive women within the home. They preached self-sacrifice and labouring for others as opposed to the self-expression offered by writing. Since writing required a cultivation of self-identity and personality, women writers often had to justify their choice to write by referring to another external reason, often connected with the need to serve society or the family.

► Criticism of women's writings

Often, women writers had to specifically use genteel and elite language which repressed and concealed 'coarser' topics, emotions, and feelings. The range of subjects and themes that women could choose were limited by this expectation of 'lady-like' conduct on the part of the women writer. Unconventional language, uncivil phrases, swear words, and profanity in women's writings were generally viewed with distaste, as were narratives that included immorality or otherwise dubious content. Early women writers thus were held to a higher standard of morality and cultural conformity because of their gendered roles. The result of such social conditioning and restricted opportunities for education, literacy, and reading were often considered to be evidence of natural ability and an inherent style of writing. In 1852, the critic G.H. Lewes notoriously complained that women's writing is too imitative and devoid of what women have really experienced and known. However,

in the early first phase, the literary language for developing such narratives and a tradition had not yet evolved.

- Symbolic representations and female realism

The socio-cultural limitations that women writers experienced also forced them to develop innovative ways to depict the private lives of women as well as their rich inner consciousness. This would lead to the evolution of a style of writing that was intense and symbolic. In many literary works by women, subversions of the ideal woman began to appear. A powerful example of this may be seen in *Jane Eyre* where the mad woman in the attic captures the passionate and sexual side of the novel's protagonist, Jane. Although many narratives by women writers present male characters as being successful in a worldly sense and assertive female characters as being actualised by marriage and domesticity, such symbolic representations offer layers of meaning and cultural interpretation. Many women writers also channeled the experiences of the working class and other oppressed categories of women. This speaks to the development of a female realism where the lives of women from various strata are explored through the lens of family, community, and society. Thus, there was a drive towards defining womanhood, not as a stereotypical experience, but as a field of myriad lived realities.

- Politics of women's writings

From the early days towards the contemporary period of women's writings, the influence of the international women's movement and feminisms is apparent in the female literary tradition. Today, women's writings comprise a dynamism of language, themes, subjects, and genre that would be hard to find in the initial phases. This may be attributed to the steady development of the female literary tradition through the right to use language that had been earmarked for male writers. Anger, sexuality, and unconventional female experiences came to be incorporated into women's writings, with female creativity being understood as both steeped in and reacting against patriarchal conditions. Women's writings, even as it is fragmented by culture, society, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity and other categories of differentiation, are unified by the conditions of marginality that surround gender. Women writers, thus, articulate an artistic vision and literary philosophy that are distinct from other genres in terms of their politics.

### 1.1.3 Aesthetics of Women's Writing

Central to the understanding of the aesthetics of women's writing is the concept of 'écriture féminine', introduced by

- ▶ Subversive aesthetics of women's writings

Helene Cixous in her essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa." The term refers to a uniquely "feminine style of writing characterised by disruptions in the text," such as gaps, silences, puns, new images and so on. *Ecriture Feminine* is eccentric, obscure, and inconsistent, with the difficulty of comprehension attributed to centuries of suppression of the female voice, which must now speak in a borrowed language. The language is believed to originate from the mother before the child acquires and begins to use male-centred verbal language; thus it is a pre-linguistic potential. It manifests itself in literary texts, abolishing repressions, undermining existing significations, the logic of phallogentric language, and opens itself out into a freeplay of meanings.

- ▶ Revolutionary use of language

Women's writing, in fact, struggles to evade patriarchal monopoly and the risk of being appropriated into the existing literary-linguistic system. Luce Irigaray suggests that in order to do so, women writers must draw on the diversity, fluidity and multiple possibilities around which female sexual experiences are structured. Julia Kristeva introduces the concept of chora, or a "pre-linguistic, pre-Oedipal, and unsystematised signifying process." The chora is centred on the mother, who foregrounds the "semiotic." Patriarchal ordered, logical language, which Kristeva dubs as the "symbolic," represses the earlier version. *Ecriture feminine*, like semiotic language, can break out in revolutionary ways, disrupting the symbolic. A prime illustration of the same can be seen in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, which is filled with strange images, breaks and pauses that display the use of a subversive language.

### 1.1.4 Major Women Writers

- ▶ Early history

Women's writings have existed in earlier cultures with the names of a few women writers emerging in history. Ancient Greece, for instance, saw the poetry of Sappho (circa 6 BCE) while the Roman poetess Sulpicia was found to have written during the reign of emperor Augustus. In the middle ages, a nun named Hrosvitha wrote plays in Latin. In the fourteenth century Japan female court poets and memoirists such as Gofukakusa (*The Confessions of Lady Nijo*) produced writings. The culture of courtly discussions on literature and the arts in France saw the involvement of noble women in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; French women writers such as Marie de France wrote poetic verses. Around the fourteenth century in Italy, Christine de Pisan became the first woman to make a living as a writer. She authored lyric poetry and

*The Book of the City of Ladies*. Italy, too had noblewomen writing religious verses. On British shores, a female mystic, Margery Kempe wrote her autobiography. These early records of women's writings, however, are few and far between in the literary production of these periods.

► Seventeenth and eighteenth century

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in western literature saw the increasing prominence of women writers. One of the earliest known historical novels was written by Marie-Madeleine Pioche de la Vergne, the Comtesse of Fayette better known as Madamedela Fayette. She wrote *La Princesse de Clèves* which was published in 1678. The literary works of women in England and America were also gaining visibility during this time. The English writer Aphra Behn (1640–1689), famous for the novel *Oroonoko* (1688) and the play *The Rover* (1677), and Anne Finch, the Countess of Winchelsea, known for her poetry, wrote during this period. The American colonies of the era also produced the poet Anne Bradstreet. By the eighteenth century, the question of women's rights had also begun to be raised in public discussions. The English writer, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote the prose pamphlet *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), which explored the same question in the rights of women.

► Novelists and poets

By the nineteenth century, women novelists such as Fannie Burney (1752–1840) and Jane Austen (1775–1817) rose to prominence. Austen's works were published anonymously, with many of them centring around women's lives and domestic experiences, particularly of the English middle-class. The most significant of her works are *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). During this time period, Mary Shelley (1797–1851), the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and wife of the poet Percy Shelley, wrote one of the earliest science fiction novels *Frankenstein* (1818). The works of the Brontë sisters, Charlotte (1816–1855) (*Jane Eyre* 1847), Anne (1820-1849) (*Agnes Grey* 1847) and Emily (1818–1848) (*Wuthering Heights* 1848) were published anonymously during the age. Their contemporary, George Eliot (the pseudonym of Mary Ann Evans) (1819–1880) wrote realistic fiction that focused on rural life, including *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Silas Marner* (1861), and *Middlemarch* (1871–1872). In the United States, Harriett Beecher Stowe's (1811–1896) *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) sold more than 500,000 copies and figured prominently in the antislavery movement. Around the same time, Louisa May Alcott (1832–1888) wrote the children's novel *Little Women* (1868–1869). Elizabeth Barrett Browning

(1806–1861), wrote a collection of love poems *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) and a long poem, *Aurora Leigh* (1856), in which she considers the virtues of women artists. Christina Rossetti (1830–1894) wrote poems such as “Goblin Market” (1862) that explored the meaning of life. It was during this period that Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) composed more than two thousand poems, though only ten were published during her lifetime. Dickinson’s poems were short and intense, and explored issues such as passion, death, and the role of art.

► Women’s fiction

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, women authors came to be acknowledged as significant writers. Short story writers such as Kate Chopin (1851–1904), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935) made innovative contributions to the development of the short story genre, adding to a widening repertoire of female characters within fiction. Chopin and Gilman examined the problems of gender relations and argued for increased political rights for women. Edith Wharton (1862–1937), the American fiction writer, explored the ethical problems of middle-class Americans in novels such as *Ethan Frome* (1911) and *Age of Innocence* (1920). Similarly, Willa Cather (1873–1947), who wrote *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918), focused on expansion into the west. The West Indian writer Jean Rhys (1890–1979) focused on colonial and race relations in Africa and the Caribbean, authoring *The Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) which retells the story of Bertha Mason from Emily Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*.

► Modernist movement and women’s writings

The literary modernism of the twentieth century comprised of many women writers who pioneered the transformations of the age. While the focus on the experiences and interiority of female characters, domestic difficulties, and their lives in a male-dominated world continued, a slew of experiments with form and style changed the landscape of literature and the arts. Within modernist aesthetics, women authors began to develop their own “lyrical modes of expression.” A prominent modernist writer, Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) wrote many novels whose style and techniques opened up an insightful window into the world inhabited by women. This includes fiction such as *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) as well as treatises that delve into women’s social status such as *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938). The experimentalist writer Gertrude Stein (1874–1946) used repetition, broken grammar, and unusual word choices in her plays and novels such as *Three Lives* (1909) and *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933). The English

novelists Rebecca West (1892–1983) and Vita Sackville-West (1892–1962), and the American novelist Zora Neale Hurston (1901–1960) who wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) were important exponents of modernist literature. Short story writer and American humorist Dorothy Parker (1893–1867) and the New Zealand writer Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923) also made noteworthy contributions in this regard.

► Modernist poetry

Women poets of the modernist movement in English included Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892–1950), Amy Lowell (1874–1925), and H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) (1886–1961) whose poetry introduced an imagist style. At the same time, Edith Sitwell (1887–1964), Marianne Moore (1887–1972), and Louise Bogan (1897–1970) presented more “personal visions of language.” In the later half of the twentieth century, a long line of innovative and accomplished poets came to prominence. This included the likes of Maya Angelou (b. 1928), Elizabeth Bishop (1911–1979), Muriel Rukeyser (1913–1980), Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2000), Anne Sexton (1928–1974), and Sylvia Plath (1932–1963). With the burgeoning of the women’s movements of the 1960s and 1970s, women’s poetry began to intermingle cultural analysis with lyrical verse, as seen in the poetry of Adrienne Rich (b. 1929), Audre Lorde (1934–1992), and Judy Graham (b. 1940).

► Modernist fiction

In literary communities around the world, women authors emerged as pivotal contributors to fiction and prose. The novelists Muriel Spark (1918–2006) and Iris Murdoch (1919–1999) are significant names in this regard. This time period also saw the publication of the feminist treatise *The Second Sex* (1949) by Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986). Lillian Hellman (1907–1984), the American playwright, produced works that showcased the human capacity for petty evil. Women short story writers including Eudora Welty (1909–2001), Tillie Olsen (b. 1913), and Flannery O’Connor (1925–1964) came to be recognized as potent female voices. Another aspect of women’s writings of the period was the emergence of Black women writers such as Alice Walker (b. 1944) and Toni Morrison (b. 1931) who gave centrality to the experiences of black women. On a similar level, Maxine Hong Kingston (b. 1940) and Amy Tan (b. 1952) focused on the lives of immigrant Chinese women. Postcolonial nations such as India produced acclaimed literature as seen in the works of Bharati Mukherjee (b. 1940), Anita Desai (b. 1937), Arundhati Roy, and Kiran Deshpande to name a few.

► Transformations

Thus women's writings comprise a wide range from works that conform to patriarchal standards to those that are radically feminist, from experimental and high art novels to bestsellers. Their tradition of writing has changed conceptions of literature, representing different, unique points of view that challenge patriarchal culture and male dominance.

## 1.1.5 Feminisms

### 1.1.5.1 Black Feminism

► Need for Black feminism

Black feminism as a term refers to the political and social movement that addresses the oppression of Black women in the United States and other countries. It seeks to understand the injustices affecting the daily lives of Black women, particularly as defined by the intertwined effects of institutional racism, classism, and sexism, among other factors. Although early Black feminist activity in the United States can be traced to the mid-19th century, the Black feminist movement gained prominence only in the 1970s. During the period of the second wave of mainstream feminism (1960s and 1970s), the concerns of Black women were largely excluded and Black women were not included in the leadership of the movement.

► Suffrage era

During the Suffrage era, as American women were fighting for women's right to vote, many African American women writers and social reformers felt that the cause of Black Americans and Black women were not being served by the mainstream movement. As a result, Frances E.W. Harper, Mary Eliza Church Terrell, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, along with others, established the National Association of Colored Women, later known as the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACWC). They critiqued the women's movements of the period as being indifferent to the racial discrimination and injustices experienced by women of colour.

By the mid-twentieth century, as the civil rights movement and women's movement were in full swing, Black women faced discrimination within the various organisations that were fighting for equal rights. They also struggled to establish their concerns within second-wave feminist organizations which centralised the lives, experiences, and interests of white middle-class women. In response, organisations such as the National Black Feminist Organisation and the Combahee River Collective came to be founded. Writer-activists such as Audre Lorde and Gloria Jean Klatkins, better known by her pen name Bell Hooks, contributed to Black feminist thought, demanding

► Intersectionality

social and political change in the period. By the later decades of the twentieth century, the third wave of feminism (1990s) proved to be more inclusive of women of colour. It brought forth the idea of intersectionality, which was coined by critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw to denote that the unique experiences and injustices faced by Black women occur along multiple axes of oppression. This is reflected in contemporary Black feminist movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo (Tarana Burke), both of which have a considerable presence of black feminist activists.

### 1.1.5.2 Postcolonial Feminism and Indian Feminism

► Western feminisms and postcolonial women

The connections and parallels between colonialism and the socio-cultural subjugation of women are at the centre of postcolonial feminism. While mainstream western feminisms emphasise female solidarity irrespective of cultural, social, and economic differences, they do not encompass the nuances associated with particular societies and cultures. As imperialism establishes a culture of western superiority and dominance over colonial territories, the feminist thinking centred around the theory that the coloniser's lived experience cannot articulate the interests of women from colonial backgrounds. Postcolonial feminists object to the idea of the commonality and universality of women's lived experiences, since these were generally based on the universalisation of western women's lives and interests. Rather, postcolonial women are noted as having their own distinct voices and feminist schools.

► Academic influence

The lens of postcolonialism offers a unique feminist perspective through which issues relating to subordination, such as migration, slavery, representation, suppression and resistance, can be viewed alongside gender struggles in a patriarchal society. Postcolonial feminism has opened up newer areas and topics for academic studies and research, providing a nuanced picture of women's lives. Postcolonial feminist theories attempt to adequately reflect the struggle of women outside the western world, addressing issues of structural inequities in groups that historically have been socially and economically disadvantaged through the creation of an alternative, critical discourse.

In many ways, postcolonial and feminist scholarship exhibit similarities. Both use critical methods that draw out histories as a way of understanding how to approach existing conditions. While postcolonial theory highlights the nature

► Interlinkages

of colonialism and its continuing consequences, feminism identifies patriarchal structures and stresses their detrimental effects on women; in a way, postcolonial feminism is able to recognise the ways in which colonialism and patriarchy are interconnected and how they target women for exploitation and oppression. Further, both postcolonialism and feminism address the marginality of their subjects, shedding light on the strategies of resistance that these groups may take up in socio-cultural contexts.

► Early feminisms in India

Indian feminisms are steeped in the philosophy of postcolonial feminisms and are characterised by intersections with caste, class, religion, and the nationalist struggle. Its rich and complex history which can be traced to colonial times may be linked to an evolution that is different from western feminist movements. Some of the earliest feminist concerns were raised in the 19th century, during British colonialism. There was a concerted effort by several social reformers of the period to raise awareness about the rights and status of women. Significantly, Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar campaigned against social evils such as Sati (widow immolation) and child marriage. Their determined interventions resulted in the banning of these discriminatory practices as well as in initiating discussions about women's rights in a largely patriarchal society.

► Postcolonial Indian feminism

Yet, these early feminist movements were limited in scope, focusing largely on the issues of upper-caste women. Further, in the colonial context, many believed that the status of women as bearers of culture reflected on India's moral progress. Thus, there was a concerted attempt to define women's empowerment as both based on tradition and modernity. Broader socio-political changes related to women's rights were conceived of only in the post-independence era. By the 1970s, various women's organisations came to the fore with a renewed focus on issues such as dowry deaths, domestic violence, and workplace discrimination. In 1974, *The Committee on the Status of Women in India* published a report emphasising the ongoing inequalities and discrimination faced by women; the report also recommended policy changes to address these issues.

Even as an awareness of women's rights and feminist thought was forming in the country, a crucial challenge remained - that of addressing the diverse needs of women across different social strata. The focus on the concerns of upper-caste and

- ▶ Inclusiveness within feminism

middle-class women, marginalized the experiences of Dalit, Adivasi, and rural women. In this regard, activists like B.R. Ambedkar, who championed the rights of Dalit women, and Phoolan Devi, who became a symbol of resistance against caste and gender oppression, emerged as icons for an inclusive approach to feminism. The concerns of working class women were taken up by the likes of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, who played a pivotal role in the Indian cooperative movement and in the struggle for women's rights, and Ela Bhatt, who founded the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), which aimed to empower women through economic independence. Prominent contemporary feminists including Arundhati Roy and Vandana Shiva have advocated for anti-capitalist and eco-feminist approaches for gender empowerment.

- ▶ Global ties

A crucial development in Indian feminism in recent years has been its ties with global feminist movements, contributing to the global discourse on women's rights. Myriad issues such as sexual harassment, violence against women, and reproductive rights have also gained prominence, leading to increased feminist activism and the requirement for legislative changes. For example, the #MeToo movement led to a nationwide conversation about sexual abuse and consent in various spheres including cinema, politics, and so on.

### 1.1.5.2 Multiracial Feminism

- ▶ 'Third world feminism'

Multiracial feminism is a term that refers to the feminisms of Black/African American, Latina/Chicana, Native American, Asian American, Arab, and Asian women, along with the inputs of anti-racist white women. The category "women of colour" is most often used to identify multiracial feminist politics in terms of the lived experiences and struggles of non-white women. Earlier, the term "third world women" was used to acknowledge women of colour across the globe and recognise their postcolonial position. 'Third world' feminists began to connect with global women's issues and concerns such as colonisation, immigration, racism, and imperialism – many of which were absent in the repertoires of white feminists. Eurocentric feminists.

In a sense, multiracial feminism may be viewed as a response to the long tradition of anti-racist collective organisation that was often obscured in the second wave feminist activism. In later years, as the urgent need of such feminist organisations across national and cultural differences became clear, the term 'women of colour' gained popularity particularly in countries

► Strategic use of term

such as Brazil, England, Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. The term marks a strategic difference from mainstream 'white' feminisms and other forms of activism that focus on the concerns of upper class/upper caste women.

As observed by Aída Hurtado (1996), there are four principles that form the baseline for most multiracial feminisms:

1. an insistence on recognising the simultaneity of race, class, and gender oppressions;
2. a claim to their racial group's history as part of their activist legacy, including struggles in their native lands;
3. an understanding that theorising can emerge from political organising, everyday interactions, and artistic production as well as the academy
4. an opposition to heterosexism in their communities.

### 1.1.5.3 Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is a philosophical and activist framework that links the exploitation of the environment with the oppression of women. It posits that both arise from a patriarchal worldview that values domination and control. Emerging in the late 20th century, ecofeminism argues that the marginalisation of women and the degradation of nature stem from hierarchical and dualistic modes of thinking that privilege men and culture above women and nature.

The earliest use of the term is attributed to the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in her 1974 book *Feminism or Death*, where she raised the need for a feminist revolution to address environmental concerns. Ecofeminism draws on both feminist and ecological movements, combining their insights to critique patriarchal systems of power which exploit both women and the natural world. The movement recognises the interconnectedness of social justice and environmental sustainability, advocating for the dismantling of oppressive structures that harm both people and the planet.

Ecofeminism highlights interconnected forms of oppression that exploit and subjugate women and nature. This perspective contests the anthropocentric and androcentric world-views that prioritise human/male interests over ecological well-being and gender equality. By highlighting these connections, ecofeminism seeks to address the root causes of both environmental degradation and gender inequality. Inherent

► Definition

► Intertwined Concerns

► Against dualisms and binaries

in ecofeminist thought is the critique of binary pairs that separate and hierarchise concepts such as culture/nature, male/female, and mind/body. These dualisms reinforce patriarchal structures by devaluing what is associated with women and nature. Ecofeminists argue for recognising the value and interconnectedness of all beings. Ecofeminists promote care, cooperation, and sustainability over competition and exploitation, emphasising the importance of nurturing relationships with the natural world and advocate for eco-friendly practices. This approach aligns with indigenous and other non-Western traditions that view humans as part of a larger ecological community.

► Activism

Ecofeminism gained popularity in the 1970s and 1980s, in parallel with the rise of environmentalism and second-wave feminism. Activists and scholars such as Rachel Carson, Vandana Shiva, Carolyn Merchant, and Maria Mies have played a pivotal role in the development of ecofeminist theory, with unique perspectives on the intersection of ecology and feminism. For instance, Vandana Shiva's work in India highlighted how rural women, who depend on the environment for their livelihoods, are disproportionately affected by ecological destruction and capitalist exploitation. Thus, ecofeminism offers a critical lens through which the root causes of environmental and social issues may be examined, creating the possibility of systemic change that prioritises the well-being of both people and the planet.

► Critical works

Several books have profoundly influenced ecofeminism, providing critical insights into the intersectional nature of the field. *Silent Spring* written by Rachel Carson (1962) is often considered a foundational text in environmentalism. Carson exposed the dangers of pesticides and has inspired ecofeminist thought by highlighting the interconnectedness of human and environmental health. Vandana Shiva in *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (1988), critiques Western development models and emphasises the critical role of women in environmental conservation. In the book *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980), Carolyn Merchant shed light on how the scientific and industrial revolutions shifted perceptions of nature from “a nurturing mother” to a resource for exploitation; she also draws out parallels between the subjugation of women and nature.

## Summarised Overview

This unit provides an introduction to women's writing and feminism. It begins by explaining that women's writing is a vast and varied body of literature that reflects the experiences, struggles and perspectives of women across many cultures and time periods. Historically, women's voices were often marginalised in literary canons, with more importance given to male authors and patriarchal narratives. However, women have always used literature to express their individuality, challenge societal norms, and advocate for change.

The unit traces the history of women's writing back to the Middle Ages, when it primarily took the form of diaries, letters, poems and stories. These narratives were distinct because they depicted experiences rarely touched on by male writers, such as housework, childbirth, and female friendships. Women writers offered new perspectives on their identities as wives, mothers, workers and thinkers. For most of history, writing was not considered an acceptable career for women. The literary world, including publishing and academia, was dominated by men. It wasn't until the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century that the Western literary scene began to open up to women writers. Even then, women often published anonymously or under male pseudonyms to avoid criticism.

The unit also discusses how women's writing emerged as a distinct genre. It outlines Elaine Showalter's theory of the evolution of women's writing, which identifies three phases: the Feminine phase (imitating male traditions), the Feminist phase (protesting and advocating for women's rights), and the Female phase (focusing on self-discovery and identity). The aesthetics of women's writing are explored through the concept of 'écriture féminine', introduced by Hélène Cixous. This refers to a uniquely feminine style of writing characterised by disruptions in the text, such as gaps, silences, and new images. The difficulty in comprehending this style is attributed to centuries of suppression of the female voice.

The unit provides an overview of major women writers throughout history, from ancient Greek poet Sappho to contemporary authors like Toni Morrison and Arundhati Roy. It highlights how women's writing has evolved and expanded over time to include a wide range of genres, styles and themes. Finally, the unit introduces various branches of feminism, including Black feminism, postcolonial feminism, multiracial feminism, and ecofeminism. It explains how these different feminist perspectives address the diverse needs and experiences of women across different social, cultural and racial backgrounds.

## Assignments

1. How do women's writings reflect the socio-political context of their time?
2. In what ways do women's writings challenge traditional gender roles and expectations?
3. How is the theme of identity explored in women's writings?
4. What concepts can be used to analyse the aesthetics of women's writings?
5. How do women writers address issues of intersectionality in their works?
6. What are the common themes in women's autobiographical writings?
7. How do women's writings depict relationships and community?
8. In what ways do women writers use symbolism and metaphor to convey their experiences?
9. How do women's writings contribute to the discourse on feminism and social justice?
10. What challenges have women writers historically faced in the literary world?

## Suggested Reading

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4. Wiegman, Robyn. "2013 Feminist Theory Workshop Keynote Robyn Wiegman." *YouTube*, 29 Mar. 2013, [youtu.be/JwPHNTO3ZBM?feature=shared](https://youtu.be/JwPHNTO3ZBM?feature=shared).

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3. *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*. Edited by Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray, Malden, MA, USA, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1 Jan. 2005.
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## Unit 2

# Four Waves of Feminism

### Learning Outcomes

Upon the completion of the unit, the learners will be able to:

- ▶ understand the broad historical contexts in the development of feminism
- ▶ analyse the thematic foci of various waves of feminism
- ▶ recognise key figures and their contributions to the different waves of feminism
- ▶ evaluate the contemporary impact of the various waves of feminism

### Background

Understanding and studying feminism are essential for fostering a society that values equality and justice for all genders. Feminism provides the analytical tools necessary to examine and challenge the systemic inequalities and patriarchal structures that have historically marginalised women and other gender minorities. By exploring feminist theories and movements, individuals gain insight as to how gender intersects with other social categories such as race, class, and sexuality to create complex layers of discrimination and privilege. This knowledge is crucial not only for addressing gender-based injustices but also for promoting a more inclusive and equitable society where everyone has the opportunity to thrive regardless of their gender.

Studying the various waves of feminism is vital for comprehending the evolution of feminist thought and activism over time. Each wave has addressed different aspects of gender inequality and has responded to the unique socio-political contexts of its era. The first wave focused on legal issues such as suffrage, while the second wave tackled a broader range of social inequalities including reproductive rights and workplace discrimination. The third wave embraced diversity and intersectionality, and the emerging fourth wave is characterised by a focus on digital activism and combating violence against women. Understanding these waves helps to appreciate the progress made, recognise ongoing challenges, and inspire future activism.

## Keywords

Waves, Feminist Activism, Critique, Gender Empowerment, Social Liberation, Cultural Roles

## Discussion

### 1.2.1 First Wave Feminism

Early feminist activity in Western countries can often be traced to the 19th and early 20th centuries; this is referred to as the First Wave of Feminism. The beginning of this stream is usually connected to the first formal Women's Rights Convention held in 1848 at Seneca Falls, New York. The convention was notably run by Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, among 300 other attendees. Stanton declared that men and women were created equal, and thus women were entitled to education, property, and organisational leadership. Throughout this period, women advocated for social and constitutional rights equal to white men. This included the right to vote, education, own property, citizenship, and the recognition of independent legal and political identities. Though there were occasional calls for addressing working women's issues and the right to pursue higher education, the central efforts were focused on obtaining the right to vote. This was due to the understanding that equal franchise would be the only way for women to be viewed as equal citizens in society.

► Early organising and concerns

► Intersectional ties

The first wave feminist movement in the United States was deeply tied to the abolitionist movement which strove for the abolition of slavery. Having been denied a place on the floor with men during an abolitionist convention, Stanton had decided to challenge the clear discrimination against women in political and cultural circles. She authored The Declaration of Sentiments, which expanded on the Declaration of Independence by adding the word 'woman' or 'women' throughout. The document also called for broader educational and professional opportunities for women. Further, it demanded that married women be allowed to control their wages and to own property. Several Black activists such as Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells and organisations such

as National Association of Coloured Women (NACW) also joined Stanton's cause. Stanton, along with Susan B. Anthony, traveled the country and gave speeches demanding that women should be granted the right to vote.

► Organisations and activities

The suffrage movement disagreed on the passing of the 14th and 15th amendments to the US Constitution, which gave voting rights to black men. Stanton and Anthony opposed this amendment, disagreeing that black men should have the right to vote before women. This view created a split with two organisations being formed; the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) in 1869 (founded by Stanton and Anthony) and the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) (which supported the 14th and 15th amendments). It was only about twenty years later, in 1890, that the two organisations merged into the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). This was also a period of 'militant' activism as exemplified by the strategies of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) set up by Emmeline Pankhurst in Manchester. The WSPU employed strategies such as arson and hunger strikes, which resulted in many of its activists ending up in prison. The women of the movement became known as the suffragettes. Notable among the militant suffragettes was Emily Davidson who protested by stepping in front of the King's horse at the Epsom Derby in 1913; she was killed as a result.

The movement proved to be successful in the following respects:

► Achievements

1. The Representation of the People Bill (1918) allowed women over the age of 30 and men over the age of 21 the right to vote in the UK.
2. In August 1920, the right to vote was extended to all women over 21 in the UK.
3. Women in the United States were given the Right to Vote in 1920.
4. The right to vote was granted in 1918 in Canada and Germany, and in 1944 in France.
5. Married Women's Property Acts in the US (1839) and UK (1882) expanded the rights of married women to acquire, hold, use, and dispose of their separate property.

► Radical views

Mary Wollstonecraft was a pioneering figure in First Wave Feminism, most famously recognised for her seminal work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). In this groundbreaking treatise, she argued that women are not naturally inferior to men but appear to be so only because they lack education. Wollstonecraft advocated for the equal education of women, positing that educating women would not only benefit them but also improve society as a whole. Her radical ideas challenged the prevailing notion that women's roles were confined to the domestic sphere and instead promoted their participation in public life.

► Advocacy for autonomy

In her advocacy for gender equality, Wollstonecraft critiqued the social constructs that limited women's opportunities and autonomy. She criticised the institution of marriage as a form of legalised oppression and called for women to be seen as rational beings capable of contributing to society beyond their roles as wives and mothers. Her emphasis on rationality and education as means of achieving equality was revolutionary for her time, laying the groundwork for subsequent feminist thought and movements. She believed that an egalitarian society, where women had the same rights and responsibilities as men, was essential for moral and social progress.

► Lived experience

Wollstonecraft's contributions extended beyond her written work; she embodied her principles through her own life. Her personal experiences with limited educational opportunities and her struggles as a single mother navigating a patriarchal society informed her understanding of the systemic inequalities faced by women. By advocating for women's rights and independence, Wollstonecraft positioned herself as a forerunner of feminist advocacy. Her life and works have inspired generations of feminists who continue to fight for gender equality, underscoring the enduring relevance of her contributions to the feminist movement.

► Legacy of first wave feminist thought

Mary Wollstonecraft's legacy in First Wave Feminism is profound. Her ideas on education and women's rights were foundational in shaping the feminist discourse of her time and beyond. She challenged societal norms and inspired a reevaluation of women's roles in society, paving the way for future feminist activists. Her work remains a crucial reference point for discussions on gender equality, education, and the fight against systemic gender oppression. As a trailblazer of feminist thought, Wollstonecraft's contributions continue to resonate in contemporary discussions about women's rights and societal progress.

## 1.2.2 Second Wave Feminism

The second wave in feminism refers to the women's movement of the '60s and '70s which represented an abrupt break with the tranquil domestic life popularly associated with women in many cultures during the time (particularly in the United States). The roots of the new rebellion were inspired by the civil rights movement, the consequent discussion of principles such as equality and justice, and the revolutionary sentiments caused by protests against the Vietnam War. Throughout the era, most western countries showed a documented pattern of employment discrimination, unequal pay, legal inequality, and meagre support services for working women. It was clear that these particular issues needed to be rectified through legislative and awareness-raising endeavours. In the United States, for instance, the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 addressed these issues. However, despite such measures, gender segregation in jobs continued as did discrimination and violence against women. The prevailing situation created a condition where women of all ages and circumstances became involved in debates about gender, discrimination, and the nature of equality.

► Public equality

Feminist organisations such as the National Organisation for Women (NOW) launched campaigns for legal equity, while others staged sit-ins and marches for a range of demands — college curricula with female authors to “promoting the use of the word Ms. as a neutral form of address.” There was a similar drive towards rewriting sexual stereotypes and biased representations with children's books and texts being changed. Women's studies departments were set up in colleges and universities. Women began to find jobs in traditionally male-dominated fields such as those of pilots, construction workers, soldiers, bankers, and bus drivers.

► Social changes

During this period, there were serious discussions about the origins of women's oppression, the nature of gender, and the role of the family. Kate Millett, in *Sexual Politics*, posited that the personal (being a space of “power-structured relationships”) was actually political. Shulamith Firestone, a founder of the New York Radical Feminists, insisted that love disadvantaged women by creating intimate bonds between them and men — who were also their oppressors. In the work *The Female Eunuch*, Australian feminist Germaine Greer argued that the sexual repression of women cuts them off from the creative energy they need to be independent and self-fulfilled.

► Theorisations

► Subgroups

However, being despite an era of feminist activism, there was no all-encompassing feminist ideology. Many sub-groups existed, such as “Anarcho-feminists” who believed that women could not be liberated without dismantling institutions such as the family, private property, and state power. Individualist feminists who disagreed about turning to government for solutions to women’s problems; and “Amazon feminists” who celebrated the mythical female heroine and advocated liberation through physical strength. Ultimately, three branches of feminism proved to be more popular than the most.

► Main branches

The first of these is liberal or mainstream feminism, which worked towards concrete and pragmatic change at an institutional and governmental level. Its goal was to integrate women more thoroughly into the power structure and to give women equal access to positions men had traditionally dominated. While aiming for strict equality, these groups supported protective legislation such as special workplace benefits for mothers. In contrast to the same, radical feminism aimed to reshape society and restructure its institutions. They argued that women’s submissive role in society was woven into the social fabric itself, and had to be transformed through the unravelling of society itself. Thirdly, a cultural form of feminism also arose which rejected the notion that men and women are intrinsically the same. It advocated the celebrating of the qualities associated with women — nurturing, affective relationships, and care. This was also a critique of mainstream feminism’s attempt to enter traditionally male spheres which cultural feminists saw as a deviation from the natural inclinations of women.

► Black feminism and the second wave

A common issue noted with second wave feminism is its focus on the problems of educated, heterosexual, middle-class white women — this left the issues of women of other classes, sexual orientations and races unattended. As a result, the movement struggled to bridge the gap between the different categories. The call by white feminists for unity and solidarity was based on the notion of common gender-based oppression. However, many prominent Black feminist activists noted that race was a key point of difference: “How relevant are the truths, the experiences, the findings of White women to Black women?... “I don’t know that our priorities are the same, that our concerns and methods are the same” (Toni Cade Bambara 1970). Despite these deviations, Black women acknowledged the interplay of sexism and racism in their lived experiences, creating a ‘double-bind’ of oppression. Such issues were

widely addressed by Black feminists including Michele Wallace, Mary Ann Weathers, bell hooks, Alice Walker, and Bettina Aptheker.

### 1.2.3 Third Wave Feminism

Emerging in the mid-1990s, third wave feminism is led by a generation who came of age in a media-saturated and culturally and economically diverse world. Even as these feminist groups benefitted significantly from the legal rights and protections garnered through the first- and second-wave feminist struggle, they also critique the positions and unfinished work of second-wave feminism. Greater economic power and professional status achieved by women of the second wave, and the information revolution of the late 20th century created the conditions for the third wave of feminism. Organisations such as the Third Wave Foundation, founded by Rebecca Walker, dedicated themselves to supporting “groups and individuals working towards gender, racial, economic, and social justice”. Inherent within the social workings of third wave feminism was the expectation of achievement and examples of female success coupled with a contradictory awareness of the barriers presented by sexism, racism, and classism. Third wave feminism battles such obstacles by subverting sexist, racist, and classist symbols, fighting patriarchy with irony, promoting stories of survival and grassroots activism.

► Foundations

The influence of postmodernist theory is apparent in third wave feminism where the very ideas, words, and media that transmit ideas about womanhood, gender, beauty, sexuality, femininity, and masculinity are questioned. There was a decided shift in perceptions of gender, with the notion of a gender continuum gaining significance over the binary categories of male/female. From this perspective, each person is seen as possessing and having the capability of expressing the full range of traits typically associated with one gender or the other. For third-wave feminists, the process of becoming conscious of one’s gender identity and sexuality as shaped by society became paramount. There was a theoretical and practical effort to intentionally construct an ‘authentic’ gender identity.

► Reconceptualisation of gender

Third-wave feminists expressed their concerns through the active subversion and play on sexist images and symbols, using double entendres and ironic language. Slang-terms used derogatorily in earlier contexts became transformed into proud and defiant labels. This is exemplified in Eve Ensler’s play *The*

- ▶ Popular culture empowerment and digital media

*Vagina Monologues*, where women's feelings about sexuality are explored. Equally illustrative of third wave feminist ethos is the punk rock band *riot grrrls* and the feminist artist collective 'Guerrilla Girls', who are a group of women artists in gorilla masks that expose female stereotypes and fight discrimination against female artists. This redefinition can be seen in popular culture as well with pop-singers, women protagonists from film and television, and other forms of media programming. The internet democratised the publishing of news and information, and increased access through e-zines, blogs, streaming platforms etc. The content of the feminist movement with respect to participants, aesthetics, and issues became globalised through digital media.

- ▶ Critique

Yet, even as the third wave was ongoing, many started to argue that the movement had lived beyond its usefulness and declared the arrival of a postfeminist age. Many feminists of an earlier generation argued, on the other hand, that not much had changed — feminism was essentially struggling for the same set of gender-related issues over centuries. The demographic that comprised the third wave was multifaceted and inclusive of many gender, ethnic, class, caste, and racial groups. This multiplicity of focus became a source of weakness since it pointed to a lack of unified agenda; however, third wave feminism rejects the effectiveness of a unified agenda or philosophy as it excludes the concerns of various vulnerable groups.

#### 1.2.4 Fourth Wave Feminism

- ▶ Body and culture

The fourth wave of feminism began in the 2010s with a focus on the body in culture, particularly on issues such as sexual harassment, body shaming, and rape culture, among others. A key tool used by fourth wave feminists is social media, where digital platforms were utilised to highlight and address feminist concerns. This new wave is often connected with a number of high-profile incidents, such as the 2012 Delhi Rape Case and the GamerGate Controversy. The first was the brutal rape and murder of a young woman in the Indian capital of Delhi, an incident which sparked local protests and international outrage. The GamerGate campaign was an online sexist harassment campaign against women journalists who reported on stereotypical and sexist representation of women within video games and commented on misogynist gamer culture. Both these cases set off serious discussions about feminist activism, women's bodies, and patriarchal culture.

► Women's march

A seminal event that characterises the fourth wave of feminism is the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election where Donald Trump defeated Hillary Clinton. Trump had a history of making inflammatory and sexist remarks against women. In the days following his victory, a private Facebook post made by an elderly woman called for a women's protest march to Washington D.C. This became viral and transformed into a call for social change, especially with regard to gender equality. On January 21, 2017, the Women's March grew to include demonstrations across the US and around the globe — around 4.6 million people attended these protests, making it one of the largest single-day demonstrations in US history.

► Digital activism

Another crucial event in the annals of fourth wave feminism is the #MeToo movement (originally launched in 2006) that addressed survivors of sexual violence, especially women of colour. The campaign gained renewed attention beginning in 2017, with the revelation that Harvey Weinstein had sexually harassed and assaulted women in the industry for many years. Victims of sexual harassment and assault from around the world and across ethnicities began sharing their experiences on social media under the hashtag #MeToo. The movement grew over the coming months, revealing the predatory behaviour of powerful men in politics, business, entertainment, and the news media. It also critiqued the culture of silence and intimidation that surrounds incidents of sexual harassment within these established industries.

## Summarised Overview

This unit provides an introduction to women's writing and feminism. It begins by explaining that women's writing is a vast and varied body of literature that reflects the experiences, struggles and perspectives of women across many cultures and time periods. Historically, women's voices were often marginalised in literary canons, with more importance given to male authors and patriarchal narratives. However, women have always used literature to express their individuality, challenge societal norms, and advocate for change. The unit traces the history of women's writing back to the Middle Ages, when it primarily took the form of diaries, letters, poems and stories. These narratives were distinct because they depicted experiences rarely touched on by male writers, such as housework, childbirth, and female friendships. Women writers offered new perspectives on their identities as wives, mothers, workers and thinkers.

For most of history, writing was not considered an acceptable career for women. The literary world, including publishing and academia, was dominated by men. It wasn't until the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century that the Western literary scene began to open up to women writers. Even then, women often published anonymously or under male pseudonyms to avoid criticism.

The unit discusses how women's writing emerged as a distinct genre. It outlines Elaine Showalter's theory of the evolution of women's writing, which identifies three phases: the Feminine phase (imitating male traditions), the Feminist phase (protesting and advocating for women's rights), and the Female phase (focusing on self-discovery and identity). The aesthetics of women's writing are explored through the concept of 'écriture féminine', introduced by Hélène Cixous. This refers to a uniquely feminine style of writing characterised by disruptions in the text, such as gaps, silences, and new images. The difficulty in comprehending this style is attributed to centuries of suppression of the female voice.

The unit also provides an overview of major women writers throughout history, from ancient Greek poet Sappho to contemporary authors like Toni Morrison and Arundhati Roy. It highlights how women's writing has evolved and expanded over time to include a wide range of genres, styles and themes. Finally, the unit introduces various branches of feminism, including Black feminism, postcolonial feminism, multiracial feminism, and ecofeminism. It explains how these different feminist perspectives address the diverse needs and experiences of women across different social, cultural and racial backgrounds.

## Assignments

1. What are the key differences between the objectives and strategies of the first and second waves of feminism?
2. How did the socio-political context of the early 20th century influence the goals and methods of the first wave of feminism?
3. In what ways did the second wave of feminism expand the scope of feminist issues beyond the fight for legal rights?
4. How did the third wave of feminism address the limitations of earlier feminist movements, particularly in terms of diversity and intersectionality?
5. What role has technology and digital activism played in shaping the agenda and impact of the fourth wave of feminism?

6. How have the various waves of feminism influenced contemporary discussions on gender equality and women's rights globally?
7. What criticisms have been levelled against the different waves of feminism, and how have these critiques shaped subsequent feminist thought and action?
8. How do the goals of the fourth wave of feminism reflect changes in societal attitudes towards gender, identity, and equality compared to previous waves?
9. In what ways have women of colour and other marginalised groups influenced and transformed the feminist agenda across the different waves?
10. How can understanding the history and evolution of the four waves of feminism inform current and future feminist movements?

## Suggested Reading

1. Mohajan, Haradhan. "Four Waves of Feminism: A Blessing for Global Humanity." *Mpra.ub.uni-Muenchen.de*, 18 June 2022, [mpa.ub.uni-muenchen.de/114328/](http://mpa.ub.uni-muenchen.de/114328/).
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SGOU

# Poetry

## BLOCK-02

### Block Content

**Unit 1 : Poetry -1**

Kamala Das: "The Dance of the Eunuchs"

Adrienne Rich: "Diving in to the Wreck"

Kishwar Naheed: "I am Not That Woman"

Maya Angelou: "A Brave and Startling Truth"

**Unit 2 : Poetry -2**

Sugathakumari: "Devadasi"

Vijayalakshmi: "The Carpenter's Daughter"

Countee Cullen: "Heritage"

## Learning Outcomes

Upon the completion of the unit, the learners will be able to:

- ▶ reflect on the emotional impact of the poems
- ▶ examine the cultural and social contexts that influenced the poems
- ▶ compare and contrast the themes in the poems
- ▶ identify and interpret the key symbols in the poems

## Background

Before reading these poems, let's explore the vibrant backgrounds and powerful voices behind them. Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck," penned during the fervent feminist movement of the 1970s, is a journey into the depths of self-discovery and social critique. Rich, an American poet and feminist theorist, used evocative imagery and potent symbolism to challenge gender norms and explore personal and collective trauma. Kamala Das, a bold and confessional Indian poet, brings the marginalised lives of eunuchs to the forefront in "Dance of the Eunuchs," using their dance as a stirring metaphor for defying social constraints. Das's work resonates with themes of identity and liberation, shaped by her own fearless defiance of traditional norms.

Kishwar Naheed, a fierce Pakistani feminist voice, in her poem "I am Not That Woman," confronts the harsh realities of female oppression and the struggle for agency within a patriarchal society. Her words are a clarion call for empowerment and resistance, deeply rooted in her personal experiences and activism. Lastly, Maya Angelou, an iconic African American poet and civil rights champion, offers a contemplative reflection on mortality and human potential in "A Brave and Startling Truth." Her poem encourages a brave embrace of life's miracles and the inevitability of death, urging readers to live authentically and courageously.

Together, these poems not only reflect diverse cultural and historical landscapes but also weave a compelling narrative of resilience, identity, and the pursuit of authenticity, making their study a rich and enlightening experience.

## Keywords

Feminism, Self-discovery, Gender norms, Marginalised lives, Liberation, Patriarchal society, Resistance, Mortality, Civil rights

## Discussion

### 2.1.1 “Diving into the Wreck”

- **Adrienne Rich**

► Feminist poet, essayist and activist

“Diving into the Wreck” by Adrienne Rich is a renowned poem that emerged during a period of significant social and cultural change in the United States. Adrienne Rich, a feminist poet, essayist, and activist, wrote the poem in 1972, during the peak of the feminist movement’s second wave. This era marked a significant moment in history when women were challenging traditional gender roles, advocating for equality, and seeking to redefine their identities and societal roles.

► Addresses the journey of self-discovery

Rich’s work often explores themes of feminism, identity, politics, and the human experience. “Diving into the Wreck” reflects her deep engagement with these themes, offering an introspective exploration of the complexities of self-discovery and empowerment. Against the backdrop of the 1970s, a time of heightened social consciousness and activism, Rich’s poem resonated with readers who were grappling with questions of identity, agency, and liberation. The poem’s metaphorical journey of diving into the depths, self-mirrored the larger social quest for personal and collective transformation. As a feminist poet, Rich was deeply committed to challenging patriarchal norms and amplifying women’s voices. The poem can be seen as a metaphorical dive into the wreckage of oppressive systems and ideologies, where the speaker confronts the remnants of social expectations and constructs that limit individual freedom and self-expression.

► Universal themes of transformation and resilience

Rich’s poem continues to be relevant today, resonating with readers who are engaged in ongoing conversations about identity, power dynamics, and social justice. Its exploration of personal transformation, resilience, and the pursuit of truth speaks to universal themes that transcend specific historical contexts, making it a timeless and enduring work of literature.

### 2.1.1.1 Summary

#### Stanza 1

*First having read the book of myths,  
and loaded the camera,  
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,  
I put on  
the body-armor of black rubber  
the absurd flippers  
the grave and awkward mask.  
I am having to do this  
not like Cousteau with his  
assiduous team  
aboard the sun-flooded schooner  
but here alone.*

- Shows a solitary speaker preparing for underwater exploration

The stanza presents a scene where the speaker, inspired by myths and perhaps the adventurous spirit of Jacques Cousteau, prepares for an underwater exploration. However, unlike Cousteau, known as the father of Scuba diving, who had a well-equipped team and luxurious setting, the speaker is alone, emphasising a sense of isolation and vulnerability. The speaker dons protective gear, described as “body-armor of black rubber,” “absurd flippers,” and a “grave and awkward mask,” highlighting the cumbersome and solitary nature of their endeavour.

#### Stanza 2

*There is a ladder.  
The ladder is always there  
hanging innocently  
close to the side of the schooner.  
We know what it is for,  
we who have used it.  
Otherwise  
it is a piece of maritime floss  
some sundry equipment.*

- ▶ The ladder symbolizes the overlooked significance of everyday objects

The poem describes a ladder that is a constant presence on a schooner, hanging innocuously by its side. The ladder serves a clear purpose for those who have used it, likely for boarding or disembarking the schooner. However, to those unfamiliar with its function, it appears as nothing more than a mundane piece of maritime equipment, akin to dental floss, among other sundry items. Through its simple imagery and understated language, the poem evokes the ordinary yet essential elements of maritime life, inviting reflection on the significance of everyday objects and their unnoticed roles in our lives.

### Stanza 3

*I go down.  
Rung after rung and still  
the oxygen immerses me  
the blue light  
the clear atoms  
of our human air.  
I go down.  
My flippers cripple me,  
I crawl like an insect down the ladder  
and there is no one  
to tell me when the ocean  
will begin.*

- ▶ Depicts a constrained descent into the ocean, filled with uncertainty

The poem captures the experience of descending into the depths of the ocean. Each step down the ladder is described as a descent into an increasingly immersive environment, with the oxygen surrounding the speaker and the blue light becoming more pronounced. Despite being equipped with flippers, the speaker feels constrained, likening herself to an insect as it crawls down. The uncertainty of what lies ahead in the ocean depths is highlighted, as there is no indication of when the true experience of the ocean will begin.

### Stanza 4

*First the air is blue and then  
it is bluer and then green and then  
black I am blacking out and yet*

*my mask is powerful  
it pumps my blood with power  
the sea is another story  
the sea is not a question of power  
I have to learn alone  
to turn my body without force  
in the deep element.*

- ▶ Contrasts diving's loss of consciousness with the empowering mask

The poem explores the speaker's experience of losing consciousness while scuba diving. The changing colours of the air, from blue to green to black, suggest a gradual loss of awareness. Despite this, the speaker's mask provides a sense of empowerment as it continues to function, pumping blood with power. The contrast between the power of the mask and the lack of control in the sea highlights the vulnerability of the human body in a natural environment. The speaker reflects on the need to learn to navigate the depths without relying solely on physical force, suggesting a deeper metaphorical journey of self-discovery and adaptation.

#### Stanza 5

*And now: it is easy to forget  
what I came for  
among so many who have always  
lived here  
swaying their crenellated fans  
between the reefs  
and besides  
you breathe differently down here.*

- ▶ Shows the speaker losing purpose, evoking a shift in atmosphere with swaying fans

The stanza reflects on the speaker's experience of being in a place where it is easy to lose sight of the original purpose amidst the multitude of others who have always inhabited the area. The imagery of "crenellated fans" swaying between reefs evokes a sense of the natural environment, perhaps suggesting the presence of sea life or vegetation. Additionally, the mention of breathing differently suggests a tangible shift in atmosphere or perspective upon being in this location.

### Stanza 6

*I came to explore the wreck.  
The words are purposes.  
The words are maps.  
I came to see the damage that was done  
and the treasures that prevail.  
I stroke the beam of my lamp  
slowly along the flank  
of something more permanent  
than fish or weed*

- Explores a wreck, symbolizing life's complexities and enduring treasures

The speaker expresses a deliberate intention to investigate a wreck, not merely for the sake of curiosity but with a deeper purpose. The wreck symbolises both damage and treasures, representing the complexities of life's experiences. As the speaker moves through the wreck with the lamp, she observes the enduring presence of something substantial amidst the transience of aquatic life.

### Stanza 7

*the thing I came for:  
the wreck and not the story of the wreck  
the thing itself and not the myth  
the drowned face always staring  
toward the sun  
the evidence of damage  
worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty  
the ribs of the disaster  
curving their assertion  
among the tentative haunters.*

- Highlights a shipwreck's remnants and beauty

The stanza reflects on a wreck, perhaps a shipwreck, and emphasises the importance of the physical remnants over the stories and myths that develop around such events. The drowned face symbolises the permanence of the disaster, while the damage inflicted by salt and sway contributes to a raw, worn beauty. The "ribs of the disaster" suggest the structural remains of the wreck, asserting their presence amidst those who cautiously explore its depths.

### Stanza 8

*This is the place.  
And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair  
streams black, the merman in his armored body.  
We circle silently  
about the wreck  
we dive into the hold.  
I am she: I am he*

- ▶ A mermaid and merman explore a wreck together

The stanza describes a scene where a mermaid with dark hair and a merman in armoured form are exploring a wreck. They move silently around the wreckage and dive into its hold. The lines emphasise the unity of the mermaid and merman, expressing that they are one and the same in this underwater exploration.

### Stanza 9

*whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes  
whose breasts still bear the stress  
whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies  
obscurely inside barrels  
half-wedged and left to rot  
we are the half-destroyed instruments  
that once held to a course  
the water-eaten log  
the fouled compass*

- ▶ Compares the self to worn instruments, indicating lost purpose

The stanza describes a drowned individual whose face remains visible but lifeless, with open eyes. The person's body still shows signs of past struggles ("breasts still bear the stress"), and his belongings, including valuable cargo like silver and copper, are left abandoned to decay in barrels. The speaker then shifts the focus to a broader perspective, describing self and others as "half-destroyed instruments" that were once guided by purpose ("held to a course"). However, now they are likened to worn-out objects like a water-eaten log and a fouled compass, suggesting a sense of disorientation and deterioration.

## Stanza 10

*We are, I am, you are  
by cowardice or courage  
the ones who find our way  
back to this scene  
carrying a knife, a camera  
a book of myths  
in which  
our names do not appear*

- ▶ Reflects on life's challenges and the obscurity of personal narratives in history

The speaker reflects on the human condition, acknowledging that we all navigate life's challenges with varying degrees of bravery or fear. Despite our individual journeys, we ultimately return to familiar settings, symbolised by "this scene." The mention of carrying a knife, a camera, and a book of myths suggests tools for survival, observation, and storytelling. The poem concludes with a realisation that our personal narratives may not be immortalised in the grand narratives of mythology or history.

### 2.1.1.2 Analysis

- ▶ Explores self-discovery and the human psyche

"Diving into the Wreck" by Adrienne Rich is an exploration of the human psyche and the complexities of self-discovery. Rich employs diverse images, metaphors, and symbolism to guide the reader through a metaphorical dive into the depths of consciousness.

- ▶ The dive represents self-discovery and exploration of identity

The speaker of the poem gets ready to dive into the unknown at the beginning of the poem, which is a metaphor for setting off on a voyage of reflection and self-discovery. The act of diving signifies a willingness to explore the recesses of the mind, confronting buried emotions, memories, and truths. The wreck, a sunken ship or structure, symbolises the wreckage of past experiences, traumas, and social constructs that shape individual identity.

- ▶ The descent into the wreck evokes haunting decay

As the speaker descends into the wreck, the imagery becomes vivid and haunting. The seclusion and introspective character of the journey are reflected in the darkness and silence that engulf the underwater setting. The wreck itself is described in detail, portraying a scene of decay, abandonment, and desolation. This imagery evokes a sense of the past's weight and the emotional baggage carried by individuals as they navigate life.

- ▶ The dive symbolizes memory, enlightenment, and identity

- ▶ Symbolizes self-awareness and confronting painful truths

- ▶ Transformed speaker gains resilience and self-acceptance

- ▶ Bold, confessional and feminist poet

Throughout the dive, the speaker encounters various objects and artefacts that hold symbolic significance. The camera represents the act of remembering and documenting experiences, while the ladder symbolises the aspiration to climb out of darkness towards enlightenment. The book of myths signifies the stories and narratives that shape personal and collective identities.

As the speaker navigates the wreck, she grapples with the complexities of self-awareness, confronting uncomfortable truths and painful memories. The act of photographing and documenting the wreck mirrors the process of reflecting on one's past, acknowledging both the beauty and the scars that define individual history.

Towards the end of the poem, the speaker emerges from the wreck transformed. She carries with her newfound insights, resilience, and a sense of empowerment. The image of the diver as both "woman and fish" represents a merging of identities and a reclamation of selfhood. This transformation signifies the journey towards self-acceptance, self-understanding, and inner strength gained through the process of diving into the wreck of one's psyche.

### 2.1.2 "The Dance Of The Eunuchs"

- Kamala Das

"Dance of the Eunuchs," by Kamala Das, is a deeply reflective and stimulating poem that explores a range of themes, including identity, freedom, and social expectations. Kamala Das, an acclaimed Indian poet celebrated for her unapologetic examination of human emotions and social conventions, composed this poem to contemplate the intricate dynamics between personal identity and the pressures imposed by society.

*It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came  
To dance, wide skirts going round and round, cymbals  
Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling  
Jingling... Beneath the fiery gulmohur, with  
Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced  
and*

*They dance, oh, they danced till they bled... There were green*

*Tattoos on their cheeks, jasmines in their hair, some  
Were dark and some were almost fair. Their voices  
Were harsh, their songs melancholy; they sang of  
Lovers dying and or children left unborn....  
Some beat their drums; others beat their sorry breasts  
And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy. They  
Were thin in limbs and dry; like half-burnt logs from  
Funeral pyres, a drought and a rottenness  
Were in each of them. Even the crows were so  
Silent on trees, and the children wide-eyed, still;  
All were watching these poor creatures' convulsions  
The sky crackled then, thunder came, and lightning  
And rain, a meagre rain that smelt of dust in  
Attics and the urine of lizards and mice....*

### 2.1.2.1 Summary

The poem describes a hot day before the arrival of the eunuchs, presenting the oppressive heat that prevailed. However, with the entry of the eunuchs, the atmosphere transforms as they begin to dance energetically. Their wide skirts twirl around them, accompanied by the rich clash of cymbals and the melodious jingling of anklets. The scene unfolds beneath a fiery gulmohur tree, with the eunuchs' long braids flying and their dark eyes flashing with intensity as they dance relentlessly, almost to the point of exhaustion. The imagery evoked by their movements is vivid and evocative, painting a picture of vibrant motion and sound.

The eunuchs themselves are described in detail, adorned with green tattoos on their cheeks and fragrant jasmines on their hair. Their physical appearances vary, with some being dark-skinned and others nearly fair, portraying the diversity within their community. Despite their outward adornments and lively dance, there is an underlying sense of melancholy in their voices as they sing of tragic themes like lovers dying

► Hot day transforms with energetic eunuchs' vivid dance.

► Eunuchs: diverse appearances, green tattoos, melancholy songs, tragic themes

and unborn children, reflecting the hardships and sorrows they have experienced.

- ▶ Eunuchs drum, wail, and appear emaciated like funeral logs.

Some of the eunuchs engage in drumming, while others express their anguish by beating their own chests and wailing in a state of vacant ecstasy. The description of their physical condition is poignant, likening them to half-burnt logs from funeral pyres, emphasising their emaciated and fragile state. This imagery of drought and decay further underscores the harsh realities faced by the eunuchs, both physically and emotionally.

- ▶ The scene captures awe with intense, contrasting storm and rain.

The scene captivates the attention of onlookers, including crows perched silently on trees and wide-eyed children who watch in awe. The eunuchs' convulsive movements and the intense atmosphere are contrasted with the impending storm as the sky crackles with thunder, signalling the arrival of rain. However, the rain described is meagre and carries an unpleasant odour, symbolising the harshness and desolation of the environment.

### 2.1.2.2 Analysis

- ▶ Struggles of marginalised class

“The Dance of the Eunuchs” by Kamala Das uses the exhausting dance performed by the Eunuchs as suggestive of the struggles and alienation faced by this marginalised class in society. The three parts of the poem portray the outward display, their inner hardships and the complexity of their marginalised existence and the poem ends on a note of pathos since their suffering is unrelieved.

- ▶ Physical and emotional pain of the eunuchs

Their wide skirts, clanging cymbals and their angelic dance in the scorching heat under the “fiery gulmohar” cannot be taken as an expression of their exuberant spirit, the repetition of the word “hot” and the statement “they danced till they bled” talk volumes about the hardships and physical exertion they felt. Their voices are harsh- an indication not only of their harsh life, but also of their undefined sexual status. Their songs are melancholic, narrating tales of dying lovers and unborn children – again an almost lamentation of them being outside the system of marriage, children or family. Ironically, they sing and dance as a ritual of blessing new born babies. The phrase “sorry breasts” points to the curse of impotency and the shame of their made-up female appearances. Their limbs are like “half burnt logs from funeral pyre” imply their burnt-out status emotionally as individuals.

- ▶ Alienation and marginalisation felt by them

The drizzle with which the poem ends that accompanies thunder and lightning is itself disappointing- nothing to soothe the extreme heat. It manages only to bring forth the mingled smell of dust and urine of lizards and mice in the attics. An image that ends the poem in utter disgust. As mentioned in an article about the poem, it is “a poignant exploration of the struggles faced by marginalised individuals using the metaphor of their dance to convey the complex layers of their experience in a society that often alienates them”.

### 2.1.3 “I Am Not That Woman”

- Kishwar Naheed

- ▶ Feminist, activist and Urdu poet

The poem “I am Not That Woman” by Kishwar Naheed serves as a powerful exploration of women’s empowerment and the social challenges faced by women in both Eastern and Western cultures. Through the use of evocative language and imagery, Naheed explores the multifaceted nature of oppression, presenting the various ways in which women are confined, devalued, and objectified.

- ▶ Challenges stereotypes, highlighting women’s struggles and triumphs

Naheed’s poem presents the struggles and triumphs of women as they navigate patriarchal structures, social expectations, and the quest for self-identity and agency. The title, “I am not that Woman,” sets the tone for a narrative that challenges stereotype and confronts the norms that diminish women’s worth and autonomy. Naheed’s powerful voice resonates throughout the poem, urging readers to reconsider preconceived notions about women’s roles and contributions to society.

- ▶ Urges reflection on women’s marginalisation and oppression

The poem is a call to action, prompting reflection on the ways in which women are marginalised, objectified, and denied opportunities for self-expression and fulfilment. Through vivid imagery and insightful commentary, Naheed sheds light on the complexities of women’s experiences in different cultural settings, drawing attention to both overt and subtle forms of oppression.

#### 2.1.3.1 Summary

##### Stanza 1

*Selling you socks and shoes!*

*Remember me, I am the one you hid*

*In your walls of stone, while you roamed*

*Free as the breeze, not knowing*

*That my voice cannot be smothered by stones,*

- ▶ Rejects commodification, asserts her voice despite barriers

The speaker rejects being reduced to a commercialised object, symbolised by “selling you socks and shoes.” She reminds the listener of her existence, hidden behind “walls of stone,” while men freely roam. Despite the attempt to silence her, the speaker asserts that her voice cannot be stifled by physical barriers like stones.

### Stanza 2

*I am the one you crushed*

*With the weight of custom and tradition*

*Not knowing*

*That light cannot be hidden in darkness.*

*Remember me,*

*I am the one in whose lap*

*You picked flowers*

*And planted thorns and embers*

*Not knowing*

*That chains cannot smother my fragrance*

- ▶ Endures oppression but remains resilient and unhidden

The stanza depicts the speaker’s experience of oppression and mistreatment, symbolised by the weight of customs and traditions that bear down on her. The speaker communicates a sense of being crushed by the expectations and norms of society, which are often restrictive and stifling. However, amidst this oppression, the speaker asserts her resilience and inner strength, likening herself to a light that cannot be hidden in darkness. She urges the oppressor to remember the duality of their relationship, where love (symbolised by picking flowers) was intertwined with pain (represented by planting thorns and embers). Despite enduring hardships, the speaker emphasises her enduring essence and resilience, suggesting that even chains cannot smother her intrinsic fragrance or identity.

### Stanza 3

*I am the woman*

*Whom you bought and sold*

*In the name of my own chastity*

*Not knowing*

*That I can walk on water*

*When I am drowning.*

- ▶ Woman sold deceitfully, shows strength despite adversity

The speaker, identifying herself as a woman, expresses being bought and sold under the guise of preserving her chastity. However, the buyer is unaware that she possesses resilience and strength, as symbolised by her ability to “walk on water” when faced with adversity, even though she may appear to be “drowning.”

#### Stanza 4

*I am the one you married off*

*To get rid of a burden*

*Not knowing*

*That a nation of captive minds*

*Cannot be free*

- ▶ Critiques marriage as a burdensome, uninformed social trap

The stanza highlights the speaker’s experience of being married off as a means to relieve someone else’s burden. However, it points out that this act was undertaken without realising the consequences. The metaphor of a “nation of captive minds” signifies a society constrained by narrow perspectives and lack of freedom.

#### Stanza 5

*I am the commodity you traded in,*

*My chastity, my motherhood, my loyalty.*

*Now it is time for me to flower free.*

*The woman on that poster, half-naked, selling  
socks and shoes-*

*No, no, I am not that woman!*

- ▶ Rejects objectification, asserting her independence and true identity

The speaker reflects on being treated as a commodity, where her chastity, motherhood, and loyalty were traded as objects. She asserts that it is now her time to break free and blossom independently. The reference to a half-naked woman in a poster selling socks and shoes emphasises the contrast between being objectified and her true identity, rejecting the notion that she is merely a product to be marketed and consumed.

### 2.1.3.2 Analysis

Kishwar Naheed's poem "I Am Not That Woman" is an exploration of the challenges and oppression faced by women within patriarchal societies. Through vivid imagery, symbolism, and a powerful narrative voice, Naheed explores the different aspects of constraints in society and women's struggles for liberation.

- ▶ Explores women's struggles and oppression in patriarchy

The repetition of the phrase "I am the one" serves as a recurring motif throughout the poem symbolising the speaker's assertive reclaiming of her identity and agency. This repetition not only emphasises the individuality and strength of the speaker but also serves as a collective voice for all women who have been marginalised and oppressed. By repeatedly asserting her existence and significance, the speaker challenges the norms laid down by society and the expectations that seek to confine and silence women.

- ▶ Asserts identity, agency, and defiance

The symbolism used in the poem is rich and evocative, adding layers of meaning to the narrative. The mention of "socks and shoes" as commodities represents the trivialisation and objectification of women in society, where their worth is often reduced to superficial and materialistic aspects. The imagery of "walls of stone" conveys the metaphorical barriers and limitations imposed on women, hindering their freedom and self-expression.

- ▶ Critiques women's objectification and social barriers

Moreover, the use of contrasting imagery such as "flowers" and "thorns" further highlights the complex and often contradictory treatment of women. The speaker reminisces about moments of tenderness and cruelty, showcasing the duality of experiences that women endure in patriarchal societies. This juxtaposition serves to underscore the challenges and hardships faced by women while navigating social expectations and roles.

- ▶ Highlights women's dual experiences

The poem also addresses the issue of forced conformity and the pressures placed on women by society. The mention of being "married off" reflects the commodification of women, where their autonomy and choices are disregarded in favor of fulfilling the norms and expectations of society. This theme of being reduced to a commodity is reiterated throughout the poem, highlighting the dehumanising effects of patriarchal structures.

- ▶ Critiques social pressures on women and their commodification

- ▶ Highlights resilience, empowerment, and defiance against oppression

Despite the adversity and objectification portrayed in the poem, there is a strong sense of resilience and empowerment in the speaker's voice. The refusal to be confined by expectations and the rejection of objectification signify a call for women's empowerment and self-determination. The final line of the poem, where the speaker defiantly proclaims, "No, no, I am not that woman!" serves as a powerful declaration of reclaiming one's identity and agency, breaking free from the shackles of oppression.

## 2.1.4 "A Brave and Startling Truth"

- Maya Angelou

- ▶ American memoirist, poet and civil rights activist

In June 1995, during the United Nations' 50th anniversary, Maya Angelou unveiled her poem "A Brave and Startling Truth," marking a significant moment in literary history. This event showcased Angelou's status as a literary luminary and highlighted her ability to use words to unite and inspire. Previously, she had made history by being the first woman and African American poet to recite at a Presidential inauguration since Robert Frost. Angelou's impact extends beyond her own achievements, serving as a beacon for underrepresented artists to influence cultural and political realms. "A Brave and Startling Truth" stands as a timeless testament to the transformative power of brave voices in shaping the world's cultural landscape.

### 2.1.4.1 Summary

#### Stanza 1

*We, this people, on a small and lonely planet  
Traveling through casual space  
Past aloof stars, across the way of indifferent suns  
To a destination where all signs tell us  
It is possible and imperative that we learn  
A brave and startling truth*

- ▶ Humanity explores space, seeking important truths about our existence.

The speaker reflects on humanity's journey through the vastness of space, emphasising our existence on a small and isolated planet. Despite traversing indifferent celestial bodies, there's a belief in reaching a destination where an essential truth awaits discovery. This truth is described as courageous and eye-opening, suggesting a profound lesson that humanity must grasp for its own growth and survival.

## Stanza 2

*And when we come to it  
To the day of peacemaking  
When we release our fingers  
From fists of hostility  
And allow the pure air to cool our palms*

- ▶ A hopeful shift to peace, releasing anger for calm

The stanza describes a moment of reconciliation and peace. It envisions a time when people let go of their anger and hostility, portrayed by releasing their clenched fists, and instead embrace a calm and peaceful atmosphere, symbolised by cooling palms in the pure air. This suggests a hopeful and transformative shift towards harmony and understanding.

## Stanza 3

*When we come to it  
When the curtain falls on the minstrel show of hate  
And faces sooted with scorn are scrubbed clean  
When battlefields and coliseum  
No longer rake our unique and particular sons  
and daughters  
Up with the bruised and bloody grass  
To lie in identical plots in foreign soil*

- ▶ A transformative moment ending hate, symbolized by falling curtains, brings peace

The third stanza describes a moment of profound change and resolution. It presents a time when hate and division are overcome, symbolised by the curtain falling on a hateful performance. Faces marked by scorn and prejudice are cleansed, and the imagery shifts to peaceful scenes where battlefields and arenas no longer claim the lives of loved ones. The idea of individuality and uniqueness is emphasised, contrasting with the past, where many were lost in distant lands.

## Stanza 4

*When the rapacious storming of the churches  
The screaming racket in the temples have ceased  
When the pennants are waving gaily  
When the banners of the world tremble  
Stoutly in the good, clean breeze*

- Shows peace and unity after chaos through imagery

In the fourth stanza, Maya Angelou paints a scene where tumultuous events, symbolised by storms and chaos in places of worship, come to an end. The imagery of waving pennants and banners trembling in the breeze suggests a moment of calm and unity after turmoil. Angelou portrays a sense of resilience and hope, indicating that even in the face of adversity, there can be a return to peace and solidarity, reflected in the stillness of flags fluttering in a refreshing breeze.

### Stanza 5

*When we come to it  
When we let the rifles fall from our shoulders  
And children dress their dolls in flags of truce  
When land mines of death have been removed  
And the aged can walk into evenings of peace  
When religious ritual is not perfumed  
By the incense of burning flesh  
And childhood dreams are not kicked awake  
By nightmares of abuse*

- Imagines a peaceful world free from violence and conflict

This stanza portrays a world free from violence and conflict. It portrays a future where weapons are discarded, children play in peace, landmines are removed, the elderly enjoy serene evenings, religious practices are not tainted by violence, and childhood innocence is protected from abuse. Angelou's imagery reflects a longing for a harmonious society where humanity transcends its struggles and embraces unity, empathy, and tranquillity.

### Stanza 6

*When we come to it  
Then we will confess that not the Pyramids  
With their stones set in mysterious perfection  
Nor the Gardens of Babylon  
Hanging as eternal beauty  
In our collective memory  
Not the Grand Canyon  
Kindled into delicious color  
By Western sunsets*

- ▶ Contrasts human achievements with nature, presenting mortality's inevitability

The poet reflects on mortality's inevitability, juxtaposing iconic human achievements like the Pyramids and the Gardens of Babylon with natural wonders like the Grand Canyon. She suggests that, despite this grandeur, death is a universal truth that transcends human accomplishments. The poem evokes a sense of humility and acceptance, emphasising the impermanence of human achievements compared to enduring monuments and scenic beauty. Angelou's imagery and contemplative tone invite readers to ponder the significance of mortality and the transient nature of human existence amidst the timeless wonders of the world.

#### Stanza 7

*Nor the Danube, flowing its blue soul into Europe  
 Not the sacred peak of Mount Fuji  
 Stretching to the Rising Sun  
 Neither Father Amazon nor Mother Mississippi  
 who, without favor,  
 Nurture all creatures in the depths and on the  
 shores  
 These are not the only wonders of the world*

- ▶ The poet values life's unity over traditional physical wonders

The poet dismisses traditional wonders like the Danube, Mount Fuji, the Amazon, and the Mississippi as not the sole marvels of the world. Instead, she suggests that there are deeper, more profound wonders beyond physical landmarks—ones that encompass the unity and interconnectedness of all life.

#### Stanza 8

*When we come to it  
 We, this people, on this minuscule and kithless  
 globe  
 Who reach daily for the bomb, the blade and the  
 dagger  
 Yet who petition in the dark for tokens of peace  
 We, this people on this mote of matter  
 In whose mouths abide cankerous words  
 Which challenge our very existence  
 Yet out of those same mouths*

*Come songs of such exquisite sweetness  
That the heart falters in its labor  
And the body is quieted into awe*

- ▶ Humanity contrasts violent impulses with a yearning for peace and beauty.

This stanza reflects on the contradictory nature of humanity in the face of mortality. The stanza presents the paradox of a world where people both seek violence and yearn for peace. Despite the presence of destructive impulses, there is also a capacity for beauty and tenderness within human expression. The stanza juxtaposes the harshness of “cankrous words” that threaten existence with the soothing power of “songs of exquisite sweetness” that evoke awe and stillness.

### Stanza 9

*We, this people, on this small and drifting planet  
Whose hands can strike with such abandon  
That in a twinkling, life is sapped from the living  
Yet those same hands can touch with such healing,  
irresistible tenderness  
That the haughty neck is happy to bow  
And the proud back is glad to bend  
Out of such chaos, of such contradiction  
We learn that we are neither devils nor divines*

The stanza presents the contradictory nature of humanity. She describes humans as capable of both destructive and healing actions. The poet emphasises the power humans wield, capable of taking life abruptly or offering healing tenderness. Angelou suggests that despite this duality, humans are not inherently evil or divine but exist somewhere in between. The imagery of hands that can strike with abandon or touch with tenderness symbolises this paradox. Through chaos and contradictions, humans learn about their complex nature, which is neither wholly evil nor wholly divine.

- ▶ Humanity's dual nature

### Stanza 10

*When we come to it  
We, this people, on this wayward, floating body  
Created on this earth, of this earth  
Have the power to fashion for this earth*

*A climate where every man and every woman  
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety  
Without crippling fear*

- ▶ Humanity must unite to create a free, fearless, and harmonious world

This stanza presents the collective responsibility of humanity to create a world where freedom and fearlessness prevail. She portrays people as inhabitants of a shared planet, capable of shaping a harmonious environment free from judgment and fear. The stanza champions the idea that individuals, regardless of their backgrounds, can coexist peacefully and authentically without the constraints of self-righteousness or anxiety.

### Stanza 11

*When we come to it  
We must confess that we are the possible  
We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world  
That is when, and only when  
We come to it.*

- ▶ Mortality urges us to recognise our potential and face death bravely

The inevitability of mortality is presented here. The stanza explores the importance of acknowledging our potential and the extraordinary nature of human existence. Angelou prompts readers to realise that they possess the capacity for greatness and are capable of miraculous achievements. The phrase “when we come to it” signifies a moment of realisation or awakening, where individuals recognise their own worth and significance in the world. By embracing this understanding, Angelou suggests that facing death with bravery and acceptance becomes possible.

### 2.1.4.2 Analysis

- ▶ Explores humanity’s quest for peace and unity

Maya Angelou’s poem “A Brave and Startling Truth” is a profound reflection on humanity’s journey towards understanding and embracing peace, unity, and our potential for positive change. Through rich imagery, rhythmic language, and a powerful message, Angelou guides readers on a transformative exploration of what it means to confront hatred and division and to aspire towards a world of harmony and compassion.

The poem begins with a portrayal of humanity as travellers on a cosmic journey, navigating through the vastness of space

- ▶ Humanity journeys through space seeking a profound truth: peace

- ▶ The refrain emphasises transformation

- ▶ Envisions a peaceful world, free from conflict and oppression

- ▶ Reveals human nature's complexity

towards a destination where a “brave and startling truth” awaits. This truth, hinted throughout the poem, is the realisation of our capacity for peace and reconciliation. Angelou uses celestial imagery such as “aloof stars” and “indifferent suns” to contrast the vastness of the universe with the intimate struggle for understanding and unity on the Earth.

The central refrain, “When we come to it,” serves as a rhythmic anchor, punctuating moments of realization and transformation. Each stanza that follows this refrain presents a vision of a world liberated from hostility, violence, and oppression. Angelou imagines a day of “peacemaking” where animosity is replaced by tranquillity and the scars of hatred are healed.

The poem’s imagery becomes increasingly vivid as Angelou envisions a world free from the ravages of war, religious conflict, and oppression. She speaks of removing “land mines of death” and ending the desecration of sacred spaces with violence. These verses evoke a powerful sense of hope and possibility, urging readers to envision a future where humanity’s potential for goodness prevails over destructive tendencies.

Through contrasts and paradoxes, Angelou underscores the complexity of human nature. She acknowledges humanity’s capacity for both destruction and healing, for cruelty and kindness. This acknowledgement adds depth to the poem’s message, emphasising the importance of self-awareness and collective responsibility in shaping a better world.

The final stanza of the poem brings the themes full circle, affirming that humanity possesses the power to create a climate of freedom and equality. Angelou celebrates human resilience, describing us as “the possible,” “the miraculous,” and “the true wonder of this world.” This culmination of the poem’s journey towards understanding and acceptance presents its overarching message of hope and empowerment.

## Summarised Overview

“Diving into the Wreck” by Adrienne Rich explores the depths of self-discovery and the human psyche through vivid imagery and symbolism. The poem metaphorically depicts a dive into the unknown, representing a journey of introspection and confronting buried emotions. The wreck symbolises past traumas and social constructs shaping identity, explored as the speaker encounters symbolic objects like a camera, ladder, and book of myths. Ultimately, the transformative journey leads to self-acceptance and inner strength. Similarly, Kamala Das’ “Dance of the Eunuchs” explores identity and freedom, using the eunuchs’ dance as a metaphor for defying norms laid down by society. The poem contrasts their liberation with the speaker’s constraints, highlighting the struggle for self-expression. Kishwar Naheed’s “I am Not That Woman” examines women’s oppression, employing powerful symbolism to challenge expectations by society and reclaim agency. These poems collectively reflect on the complexities of identity, resilience against oppression, and the pursuit of authenticity and empowerment. Maya Angelou’s “A Brave and Startling Truth” reflects on mortality, urging acknowledgment of human potential. The poem emphasises the miraculous nature of life and encourages embracing death with bravery. It prompts a shift in perspective towards living authentically and facing mortality as a natural part of the human experience.

## Assignments

1. Explore the theme of defiance against social norms in Kamala Das’ “Dance of the Eunuchs.” How does Das use vivid imagery and metaphorical language to convey the eunuchs’ liberation through dance?
2. In Adrienne Rich’s “Diving into the Wreck,” how does the metaphor of diving symbolise the journey of self-discovery and introspection? Analyse the role of imagery and symbolism in depicting the complexities of identity and the human psyche in the poem.
3. Kishwar Naheed’s “I am Not That Woman” addresses the challenges faced by women within patriarchal societies. Elucidate.
4. How does Maya Angelou use imagery and language in “A Brave and Startling Truth” to convey the themes of mortality and human potential?
5. Discuss the significance of resilience and defiance in the face of oppression in Kamala Das’ “Dance of the Eunuchs” and Kishwar Naheed’s “I am Not That Woman.” How do these poems portray the struggles and challenges faced by marginalized groups, and what message do they convey about the human quest for freedom and self-expression?

## Suggested Reading

1. Das, Kamala. *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*. Oxford University Press, 1973.
2. Harris, Trudier. *The Poetry of Maya Angelou*. University of Illinois Press, 1994.
3. Naheed, Kishwar. *The Collected Poems of Kishwar Naheed*. Oxford University Press, 1999.
4. Rich, Adrienne. *Collected Poems 1950-2012*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2016

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1. Braxton, Joanne M. *Maya Angelou: A Glorious Celebration*. Louisiana State University Press, 1999.
2. Ghosh, A. *Kamala Das: A Study of Her Poetry*. Sterling Publishers, 1987.
3. Khan, M. Y. *Voices of South Asian Women Writers*. Orient Blackswan, 2005.
4. Moss, R. *The Poetry of Adrienne Rich: A Study of Themes*. University of California Press, 2001.
5. Reddy, G. S. *Kamala Das: A Critical Study*. Authors Press, 2004

## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

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### Learning Outcomes

Upon the completion of the unit, the learners will be able to:

- ▶ become aware of the exploration of nature, social justice, and feminist issues in the poems
- ▶ reflect on the emotional impact of the poems
- ▶ acquaint themselves with the symbols used in the poem
- ▶ compare and contrast the themes in the poem

### Background

Sugathakumari's poem "Devadaasi" depicts a devadaasi, a temple dancer, who, despite her devotion and isolation on the temple's first step, is ridiculed by passersby and struggles with feelings of abandonment. The contrast between her silent suffering and the vibrant festival above highlights her emotional turmoil and unfulfilled role. Similarly, Vijayalakshmi's "Thachante Makal" continues themes from G. SankaraKurup's *Perunthachan*, focusing on a carpenter's daughter who yearns for creative independence. The poem intertwines craftsmanship, spiritual significance, and the impact of celestial influences, reflecting on the brother's unique artistic vision and the tragic irony of his early death.

### Keywords

Isolation, Devotion, Misunderstanding, Anguish, Identity, Independence

## Discussion

### 2.2.1 “Devadasi” - Sugathakumari

Sugathakumari (1934–2020) was a renowned Indian poet and activist from Kerala. Her work dealt with themes of nature, social justice, and feminist issues, deeply influencing contemporary Malayalam literature. Sugathakumari was a prominent figure in environmental and feminist activism, advocating for ecological preservation and women’s rights. Her poetry, marked by emotional depth and lyrical beauty, often reflects her commitment to social causes and her love for the natural world. Through her writing and activism, she made significant contributions to both literature and social reforms in India.

- ▶ Indian poet and activist from Kerala

#### 2.2.1.1 Summary

The speaker, a devadaasi (temple dancer), sits alone on the first step of the temple, devoid of the typical adornments like anklets and bangles. Dressed in a worn rug with strands of grey in her hair, she sings praises to the divine while remaining shrouded in shadows. Her stillness and lack of decorations cause passersby to misinterpret her silence as madness, leading them to laugh at her unresponsive demeanor. Despite their laughter, she remains devoted and steadfast in her role as a devadaasi.

- ▶ A devadaasi, misunderstood and unadorned, remains devoted.

The speaker describes her appearance as dirty and worn, with her eyes weeping silently. She listens to the lively noises and celebrations from the shrine above, filled with the sounds of anklets and festive songs. These sounds suggest a vibrant festival taking place, but she remains seated below, unable to partake. The fragrant scents of flowers, sandalwood, and camphor descend from above, driving her to a state of emotional turmoil and confusion.

- ▶ The speaker, worn and silent, contrasts festive sounds.

As she involuntarily dances with a broken heart, she questions the purpose of her talents if they are not meant for divine service. She reflects on her inability to ascend the temple steps and laments feeling abandoned by the divine presence. This sense of abandonment leads her to ponder the nature of happiness, feeling isolated while remaining on the first step of the temple.

- ▶ Devadaasi questions her purpose, feeling abandoned and isolated.

- ▶ Final gesture of devotion as shrine closes

In the quiet of the night, as the shrine closes and the divine seems distant, the speaker prepares to leave. Before departing, she throws sweets on the first step as an offering, a final gesture of devotion despite her unfulfilled wait and the seeming absence of divine response.

### 2.2.1.2 Analysis

- ▶ Explores devotion, isolation, and existential questioning

Sugathakumari's poem "Devadaasi" presents an exploration of devotion, isolation, and existential questioning through the perspective of a devadaasi—a temple dancer dedicated to the service of the divine. The poem juxtaposes the inner spiritual world of the devadaasi with the external perceptions and interactions she faces, providing a rich commentary on faith, social expectations, and the search for meaning.

- ▶ Devotion contrasts isolation.

Devadaasi's devotion is evident in her unwavering presence on the temple steps, where she performs her ritual duties despite her apparent isolation and lack of traditional adornments. Her solitude on the first step symbolises her separation from the divine presence she serves, presenting the tension between her sacred role and the mundane reality of her existence. The absence of anklets and bangles, typically worn by temple dancers, emphasises her disconnection from the celebratory aspects of her role and her immersion in a more profound, yet solitary, spiritual experience.

- ▶ Devotion misunderstood

The poem reflects on how devadaasi's devotion is misunderstood by others. People tossing coins at her and laughing at her stillness perceive her as mad, revealing a social disconnect between devadaasi's spiritual dedication and the public's superficial judgements. This misinterpretation shows a broader theme of how true devotion is often unrecognised and undervalued by those who do not understand its depth.

- ▶ Scents of celebration contrast with devadaasi's inner anguish.

The sensory details—the smells of flowers, sandalwood, and camphor—contrast with the devadaasi's emotional state. While the festive atmosphere and divine scents suggest a vibrant celebration, her internal experience is one of anguish and confusion. The imagery of scents descending from above creates a sensory dichotomy, symbolising the gap between the divine festivities and her own emotional desolation.

- ▶ Devadaasi questions her divine purpose and gifts

Devadaasi's internal conflict is presented as she questions the purpose of her talents and her role. Her involuntary dancing and broken-hearted state reflect her struggle with the apparent lack of divine recognition and purpose. She doubts the reason

for her gifts if they do not align with her service to the divine, revealing her deep sense of disillusionment and abandonment.

- ▶ Devadaasi's gesture shows enduring devotion

In the concluding lines, as the temple closes and the divine seems distant, devadaasi's act of throwing sweets on the first step serves as a final gesture of devotion and anguish. This act symbolizes her enduring commitment despite her unfulfilled wait and the apparent absence of divine response. It reflects her deep love and dedication, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles and the finality of the night.

- ▶ Explores devotion, divine presence, and spiritual struggle

Sugathakumari's "Devadaasi" offers a powerful meditation on the complexities of devotion, the nature of divine presence, and the struggle for spiritual fulfilment. Through vivid imagery and emotional depth, the poem captures the essence of a devadaasi's spiritual journey and the often-unrecognized sacrifices she makes in the name of faith.

## 2.2.2 "The Carpenter's Daughter"

- Vijayalakshmi

- ▶ Masterful storyteller from Kerala

Vijayalakshmi, a renowned figure in contemporary Malayalam literature, extends the narrative of G. Sankara Kurup's iconic *Perunthachan* through her compelling work, "Thachante Makal." Her poems, though not explicitly feminist, resonate powerfully with women's experiences, using subtlety and understatement to leave a lasting impact. Having begun her poetic journey at a young age, Vijayalakshmi has garnered acclaim with collections like *Mazha Tan Matteto Mukham* and *Andha Kanyaka*, earning accolades such as the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award. In "Thachante Makal," she introduces a talented daughter to Perunthachan's story, exploring themes of grief, doubt, and reflection through poignant imagery and introspective dialogues. Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan's translation of this evocative poem, featured in the Oxford India Anthology of Malayalam Literature, showcases Vijayalakshmi's masterful storytelling and her ability to evoke deep emotions while challenging social norms. "Thachante Makal" stands as a testament to Vijayalakshmi's unique voice and her contributions to Malayalam poetry.

### 2.2.2.1 Summary

#### Stanza 1

*I bow to that magnificent spirit*

*That carved*

*A thousand temple towers  
 As I leave  
 With a box of chisels and a ruler  
 I will not be a prey to that floor chisel.  
 Since early days  
 My mind, mute and meek  
 Was geared to my father's austere discipline.  
 What fun I had  
 Playing with the scattered wood shavings,  
 Joining them, making forests out of them!*

- ▶ Challenges traditional roles, embracing independence and creativity

The speaker, the daughter of the carpenter, admires the magnificent spirit who created a thousand temple towers. As the speaker leaves with tools like chisels and a ruler, she expresses her determination not to succumb to the fate of being merely a floor chisel, hinting at a desire for independence and creativity. The speaker reflects on her upbringing under her father's strict discipline, contrasting it with the joy she found in playing with wood shavings, symbolising her innate creativity and desire to explore beyond traditional constraints.

### Stanza 2

*A droplet in clouds blue-  
 On earth massive trees  
 Rise from seeds.  
 From millions upon millions of stars  
 To the earth come light and life.  
 So too it was in me that his fire fell and flared.*

- ▶ Celebrates cosmic creativity and inherited genius

The stanza depicts the interconnectedness of the universe, comparing a droplet in blue clouds to massive trees growing from seeds on Earth. It reflects on the vastness of creation, from countless stars bringing light and life to our planet. She hints at an analogy between these cosmic creative phenomena and her inheritance of her father's genius (his fire [that] fell and flared in her).

### Stanza 3

*Sometimes, while he worked  
He recited verses from the Vastuvidya.  
We listened, my brother and I, to his right and left;  
Words conjuring  
Rajjusutra, lines and points—  
judgement of directions—  
properties of land—  
measurements and calculation.*

- Highlights equal tutelage of son and daughter in tradition

The poem describes moments of listening to the speaker's father, who is immersed in his work as he recites verses from Vastuvidya, an ancient Indian architectural treatise. The speaker and her brother, positioned on either side of their father, absorb the words that explain concepts like Rajjusutra, directional judgments, land properties, and mathematical calculations related to measurements. What is noteworthy here is the fact that it was not just her brother who received tutelage from the great Perunthachan, but both in equal measure—son and daughter, the male child and the female child.

### Stanza 4

*We learnt from father, the principles of architecture  
Following Bhaskareeyam and Mayamatam  
theories about the position of Vastupurusha,  
And even the technique of building koothumadam  
– the dance theatre.  
Yes, I listened to him and learnt it all,  
Together with my brother.*

- Affirms equal learning of architectural wisdom for both genders

The speaker and her brother learned about architecture from their father, including principles from texts like *Bhaskareeyam* and *Mayamatam*, which discuss the position of Vastupurusha, as well as techniques for constructing koothumadam, a dance theatre. She listened attentively and gained knowledge alongside her brother. The assertion of the boy and girls' equal participation in learning the architectural nuances is continued in this stanza as well.

### Stanza 5

*At times, the great man would say,  
Knowledge is not enough,  
Learning should be practical  
The greatness of human beings lies  
In breathing life into  
scientific truths.*

- ▶ Emphasizes the artistry in transcending technical knowledge

The great man would remind them that mere knowledge was not enough to make one a great artist or sculptor. A thachan's genius lies in breathing life into the dull matter-of-fact science of carpentry.

### Stanza 6

*As you carved wooden lotuses  
I stood witness to their arresting beauty.  
In their hearts when you fashioned buzzing bees,  
Who could fathom your arcane workings?  
A door which at the touch of a finger on the left  
Opened into an underground cavern  
The sixth square, which caved in at the pressure  
of a foot  
And sank into a sea of water;  
The young coconut, on which I carved a black eye  
Making a doll to play with.  
In the midst of all this, my left eye saw  
In that unmoving eye, the smoldering embers of an  
inner eye.*

- ▶ Explores hidden complexities of craft and innate creativity

This stanza reflects on the complexities of craftsmanship and creativity, likening the process of carving wooden lotuses and crafting buzzing bees to mysterious and arcane workings. The speaker witnesses the beauty of these creations, marvelling at the craftsmanship that transforms wood into art. The stanza also hints at the subtleties of the craft, presented as a door leading to an underground cavern and a square that collapses into water under pressure. The last four lines of the stanza continues the parallel theme established earlier; the creative

genius not of the illustrious father and equally talented son, but also of the girl narrator. She casually carved a black eye on a tender coconut to make a doll to play with. But the eye she carved, though unmoving externally, had captured in it, the fire (embers) of her creative genius- “the smoldering embers of an inner eye”.

### Stanza 7

*Carved ceilings, in many places, here and beyond,  
Pillars supporting the faces of hope,  
Within the pillars Narasimhas,  
aglow with the light of a hundred thousand suns  
wait to spring forth.*

*The new embankment to the lake shaped neither  
as a circle,*

*A square nor as a definite angle,*

*Yet embracing all this, its look disorienting*

*Even the Ashtadikpalakas, the Guardians of the  
Eight Directions.*

*The trick by the doll on the bridge,*

*The steps shaped like musical instruments*

*Leading to the dome of the sanctum sanctorum,*

*Words to Agnihotri that the principle*

*Of the single chosen deity*

*Should stay stable in the mind of man*

*Fixed as if by ashtabandha, the glue of eight  
ingredients:*

*All this I reminisce as I turn to face the past.*

The speaker reflects on various architectural and symbolic elements that evoke a sense of nostalgia and spiritual significance. Carved ceilings and pillars adorned with Narasimha faces symbolise hope and radiate intense energy. The description of a new endeavour, unconventional in shape yet encompassing all angles, confuses even the mythical Guardians of the Eight Directions. The mention of a doll's trick on a bridge and steps resembling musical instruments leading to a sanctum sanctorum adds a layer of mystique to the setting. The speaker recalls words spoken to Agnihotri

- Reflects spiritual symbolism, architectural intricacies, and nostalgic faith

about the importance of maintaining faith in a single chosen deity, akin to being held firm by the glue of eight ingredients. These reminiscences highlight the deep-rooted spiritual beliefs and intricate architectural details that hold significance in the speaker's journey of facing and embracing the past.

### Stanza 8

*The past like fields shrouded in waves of moonlight.  
On its border stands  
the ghost of a loved one  
like a paala tree in full bloom.  
Its scent harrowing.  
The one, who from the day of birth grew along with  
me,  
The one who rubbed grime and soot  
When I hurt my knee and cried aloud;  
The one who made swings  
And pushed them for me.  
The one who declared, when I came of age,  
'It is time to request Devendran, the King of Gods  
To tie the taali around the neck of my beloved  
sister!'  
The one who then picked a fine piece of sandalwood  
And carved a perfect idol for me.*

- ▶ Recalls brother's loving care, symbolized by poignant memories and gifts

The past is depicted as distant, ethereal fields illuminated by moonlight. At its edge, a ghostly presence of a cherished loved one- her brother, stands, resembling a paala tree in full bloom with a scent that is both poignant and haunting. This figure has been an integral part of the speaker's life, accompanying her from birth and providing comfort during moments of pain. The loved one's acts of care included tending to the speaker's injuries, creating and pushing swings, and being so proud of his sister's beauty and charm that he wanted Devendran, the King of Gods to tie a taali around her neck. The brother then carved a sandalwood idol of Devendra and gifted it to her- if not the real Devendra, at least an idol of him for her.

### Stanza 9

*Trees to my brother were  
Half-finished idols waiting to be completed.  
Gods, childless came to him in sleep and pleaded:  
'Please make idols of us!'*

- ▶ Blends spirituality and nature, highlighting sacred potential in trees

In the poem, the speaker reflects on how trees were perceived by her brother as incomplete idols, suggesting they were divine figures awaiting fulfilment. These trees, seen as half-finished, evoke a sense of divinity and sacredness. In his dreams, the brother encounters gods who, lacking children, implore him to transform them into finished idols. This plea from the gods shows the brother's unique ability to bestow form and significance upon these natural forms, blending the spiritual with the tangible and emphasising the sacred potential within the natural world.

### Stanza 10

*I flung at him  
the sting of my criticism  
So as to make him work better,  
To which he responded ever and always  
With an enigmatic half-smile.*

She threw sharp criticism at him to motivate him to improve his work. Despite the harsh words, the recipient always responded with a mysterious, half-smiling demeanour. His reaction remained consistently cryptic. The half-smile seemed to convey a complex mix of emotions. This enigmatic response contrasted with the direct criticism, leaving his true feelings and thoughts open to interpretation.

### Stanza 11

*He who knew his craft was once  
Carving a stone idol of Ambika, the Mother  
Goddess,  
And I said in jest:  
'It is a pity the idols you make  
Are just like father's.'  
Looking straight into the tender eyes*

- ▶ Criticism met with enigmatic, half-smiling response, evoking mystery

*Of my brother, a pensive man  
Who knew no anger, I said this too:  
'You cannot grow in the shade of a huge tree  
Your nourishment comes from seeking sunlight,  
By yourself, unaided,'  
But he, gentle and virtuous, would not agree.*

- Suggests growth through independence, brother remains steadfast in virtue

The passage describes an interaction between the sister and the skilled sculptor, the brother, who was carving an idol of the Mother Goddess Ambika. The narrator makes a jest about the similarity between the sculptor's idols and those created by their father. Addressing her brother, who is introspective and calm, the narrator suggests that growth and self-development come from seeking one's own path rather than relying on the protection of a large, overshadowing presence. Despite this advice, the brother, characterised by his gentleness and virtue, does not concur with the notion.

#### Stanza 12

*For him the astrologer predicted untimely death  
Seeing signs inauspicious in the horoscope.  
But my elder brother, devoted to father,  
Followed his sire like a shadow.  
Unsuspecting disciple, he wore on his face his  
usual smile,  
Filled with the sheen of burnished gold,  
Even as he lay with his throat severed.*

- Contrasts unwavering loyalty and joy against tragic fate

The astrologer foretold an early death for him, interpreting ominous signs in his horoscope. Despite this grim prediction, my elder brother remained steadfast and devoted to our father, following him closely like a shadow. His loyalty was unwavering, and he continued to wear his usual, radiant smile, which seemed to shine with the brilliance of burnished gold. This contrast of his joyful demeanour against the tragic reality of his fate—his throat having been severed—shows the cruel irony and stark reality of his untimely death.

### Stanza 13

*Even now inauspicious death  
Lies under my feet as a hungry serpent.  
The floor chisel, darkened by blood stains  
May slip and fall on my sleeping mat too!*

- ▶ Symbolizes vulnerability to the threat of death and hazardous tools

The speaker reflects on the ever-present threat of death, likening it to a menacing serpent coiled beneath her feet. This image conveys a sense of imminent danger and vulnerability. She further describes the floor chisel, stained with blood, as a potential hazard that could fall onto her sleeping mat.

### Stanza 14

*I cannot, like an impassioned Rajput,  
court death on the battlefield of revenge.  
And insulting elders is indeed a great sin!  
Moreover, if that spirit which carves  
The wonders of the world slips again  
Who is there to question it?  
Who is fearless enough to face the elephant in rut  
and chain it?  
Brother, it is beyond me  
To offer my young blood as a tribute to you.*

- ▶ Expresses grief and fear of vengeance against brother's murder

The grieving sister confesses her lack of guts to avenge the brother's murder. She cannot die in pursuit of revenge, like a Rajput can. Moreover, disrespecting an elder is a great sin. She is scared of the consequences of any revolt from him- the Perunthachan (the "spirit which carves the wonders of the world") will again slip a chisel to create another death by accident. There won't be anyone to question him. Nobody will dare an elephant in rut and chain it. Pitifully, she tells her brother that she is not bold enough to spill her young blood as a tribute to him- to avenge his death.

### Stanza 15

*Alone in my own terrain, I took unto my heart  
The weight of a stone chisel.  
Striking on the black and white stones*

*I began to learn the lessons of life.*

*The twist chisel turned and did my bidding.*

*The small chisel, softened by ghee, submitted to my will.*

*Tame and petted as pampered cows were now the foot ruler and the scale in my gentle hands.*

- ▶ Embraces responsibility and mastery through gentle craftsmanship

Alone in her own domain, she embraced the responsibility of shaping her path, symbolised by a stone chisel. As she worked with both black and white stones, she began to understand deeper life lessons. The twist chisel followed her direction, while the small chisel, softened by ghee, yielded to her control. The once rigid tools, now as compliant and cherished as pampered cows, became extensions of her will, reflecting the mastery and gentleness with which she approached her craft.

#### Stanza 16

*Father's craft in chiselling thick tree trunks*

*Into thin slabs of wood—*

*I mastered to challenge the wild seas*

*With boats hewn from my thoughts.*

- ▶ Learns from father's craftsmanship, transforms ideas into vessels

The speaker reflects on learning from her father, who expertly carved thick tree trunks into thin slabs of wood. Inspired by this craftsmanship, the speaker mastered the skill of transforming her own ideas into boats, metaphorically challenging the wild seas.

#### Stanza 17

*Outside my closed and bolted doors*

*Came day and night, summer and monsoon,*

*While I sat within these anthills of my mind*

*looking deep into myself.*

- ▶ Trapped in introspection, reflecting on her complex thoughts

Outside her securely locked doors, the cycles of day and night, summer and monsoon continued unabated. Meanwhile, she remained within, metaphorically trapped in the intricate anthills of her own thoughts. She was deeply introspective, examining the depths of her mind as if it were a complex, bustling anthill.

### Stanza 18

*Those who grieve, those that smile,  
Those who fear, those that are peaceful,  
The devas, kinnaras and yakshas,  
The king of asuras who plays the Rudraveena,  
Sukra, the master of Demonology,  
Who keeps a pot of wine next to him,  
Accursed Yayati,  
Ahalya who looked at Indra with desire,  
Bhishma who had to lie on a bed of arrows  
For supporting wrong:  
Out of the marrow of the trees, I chiselled them all  
Into expressive shapes.  
Why did the sunlight falling on the half-closed door  
Grow dim once in a while as I worked?  
Did the shadow of a magnificent figure shut the light  
out?  
Just a glance and then moved off:  
What could be the purpose?  
To kill or to nurture?  
Fright and adoration flare up  
As at the sight of a fierce tiger  
In the heart of the forest.  
No, I do not believe in people's gossip;  
Yet the image of a broad chisel stained with blood  
Moves in the air;  
And it is enough to disturb my concentration!  
Even I struggle to carve the dragon's protruding  
tooth  
I have to carve many emotions—  
Contempt, wonder, compassion and control  
Carve I must, arrogance and competition,  
The forest fire of jealousy that blazes;*

*Carve I must, the desire that comes in disguise  
Riding Pushpaka, the celestial aircraft.*

The “Thachan’s daughter” did not completely rest her vengeance. She mastered her father’s art as a retaliation to his cowardly act of finishing off the greater talent- her brother.

► Seeks vengeance through art

The passage describes how she carved various figures and emotions from the essence of trees. It begins by listing a range of beings and figures, both divine and mortal, such as those who grieve or smile, celestial beings like devas and kinnaras, and mythological characters like Sukra and Yayati. She chisels these figures into expressive shapes, pondering why sunlight sometimes dims as she works, suspecting it might be due to a powerful, unseen presence. This presence of her father watching over her, could either be threatening or nurturing, evoking a mixture of fear and reverence similar to encountering a fierce tiger. Despite dismissing gossip, the sculptor is disturbed by the unsettling image of a blood-stained chisel that was used to kill her brother, which disrupts her focus. But she has to continue carving complex emotions like contempt, wonder, and jealousy, that her father might have felt for his son, along with intricate desires, represented by the celestial aircraft Pushpaka.

### Stanza 19

*The asura chief  
Who created the three cities,  
Sudharma, the durbar of the devas,  
And the palace of the Pandavas,  
Comes in dreams and says:  
'Break the bondage of the silken thread,  
Go away,  
As the moonlight falls on the window  
Pick up your toolbox and leave this house.'  
Like a coward I pondered over this every night;  
To flee in fear is not easy.  
No point in feeling scared;  
One has to confront life boldly  
And leave bidding a proper goodbye.*

- ▶ Advised by asura chief, she confronts fear and seeks courage

In this passage, the asura chief, known for creating the three mythical cities of Sudharma, the divine court, and the Pandava palace, appears in dreams with an urgent message. He advises her to break free from the filial bond symbolised by a “silken thread,” urging the girl to leave the house under the moonlight, equipped with a toolbox. The speaker reflects on this nightly advice, grappling with fear at the challenge of abandoning her current situation. She realises that fleeing in fear is futile and acknowledges the importance of facing life’s challenges courageously. It emphasizes the need for a proper farewell rather than a hasty escape.

### Stanza 20

*I went to father in prayer after his morning dip  
And said:  
'Today is Saptami, the seventh day,  
It is good to start a journey  
With your blessings.'*

- ▶ Seeks father’s blessings for a new journey ahead

The speaker approached her father in prayer when the father returned after his morning dip. She mentioned that it was Saptami, the seventh day, and expressed her desire to start a journey with her father’s blessings. She sought her father’s approval and spiritual support for the auspicious beginning of her endeavour.

### Stanza 21

*He, Brahmadeva to me, opened his eyes,  
His deep voice fell on top of my head:  
'Go  
But, wherever you go, remember,  
The name that endures rests on your fingertips.'*

- ▶ Father grants permission, reminding her of enduring significance within

Her father who for her was Brahmadeva, the creator, her creator, gave his permission in his deep voice. Yet, he emphasized that wherever she travelled, she should always remember that the enduring name, symbolising eternal significance, remains within her grasp, metaphorically resting on her fingertips.

## Stanza 22

*True, what else can a father wish for a daughter!  
A father who lost his name with a slip of his finger!  
This toolbox weighs more with the added weight of  
the journey.  
No disciples for me, no followers,  
No friends to give me company,  
No folks to praise my sculpting skills.  
For me henceforth the far wild,  
The world of the lone tusker,  
With no light save the one from Arundhati,  
The star in the vicinity of Saptarshi, the Great  
Bear!  
Thus am I on my path with this chisel box and the  
ruler  
As planets benign and malignant  
move headlong in their orbits!  
I will not be a prey to the broad chisel!*

► Daughter embraces  
solitary journey

A father's deepest wish for his daughter is questioned as he reflects on his own losses, symbolized by the slip of his finger that caused the death of his son by which "slip" he earned a malign reputation ("lost his name"). Her toolbox, burdened by her journey, represents her solitary path, marked by a lack of disciples, followers, friends, or praise for her craft. She faces a future akin to the solitary existence of a lone tusker, guided only by the distant star Arundhati amidst the Saptarshi constellation. As she navigates her path with only a chisel and ruler, she contemplates the influences of celestial forces on her journey. Despite these challenges and the risk of being overshadowed, she remains determined not to be overwhelmed by the broad chisel, symbolising external pressures or criticisms.

## Stanza 23

*Long ago, as the story goes, Viswakarma Prajapati,  
The master sculptor of the devas,  
Gave Samjna, his daughter,  
To Surya, the Sun god, in marriage.*

*In the heat of passion the Sun burnt her insides,  
Turning into a volcano.  
On learning of her grief  
That father, such his dexterity that he put the Sun  
to his grinding stone and tamed the flare.  
Will the hands of that untiring divine sculptor,  
Filled with love and tenderness, be  
Ever inexact?*

- Explores parental protection, longing for care and precision

The story recounts how long ago, Viswakarma Prajapati, the divine sculptor, who gave his his daughter, Samjna, to Surya, the Sun god in marriage. During their union, the intense heat of Surya's passion for her caused Samjna significant suffering, likened to a volcanic eruption. Distressed by her pain, Viswakarma, known for his skill, intervened by putting the Sun god to his grinding stone to temper the burning intensity. The narrative portrays the sculptor's exceptional ability to manage even the mightiest forces with care and precision, questioning whether his loving and meticulous hands could ever falter. The daughter-narrator of the poem indirectly expresses her longing for a similar protective care from her father.

#### Stanza 24

*If so, I can forswear my meagre sculpting skills  
And court death, a severed head in the pool of  
blood  
Spilt by the sublime weapon that slips  
From the unrelenting hands of the Sculptor-God.  
The mighty banyan tree with roots above and  
shoots below  
Is not the sort to nurture miniscule life forms.  
They say my grandfather thought  
God who gave you a mouth  
Will arrange for your food as well.  
And so, here, let me go with my chisel box and  
ruler.  
I will not be a prey to the broad chisel.*

- ▶ Embraces freedom from patriarchal constraints, seeking autonomy

The speaker asserts her willingness to give up her humble sculpting skills and court death in exchange for such fatherly love. She remembers about the banyan tree that does not permit lowly lifeforms underneath its mighty presence. Her grandfather's belief that God will find ways and means to feed his creations reassures her to be on her own and assert her freedom. She won't be another prey to the broad chisel that slips out of parental fingers. At the end of the poem, she thus sets herself free from the parental/patriarchal clutches.

### 2.2.2.2 Analysis

Vijayalakshmi, a luminary in contemporary Malayalam literature, expands upon G. Sankara Kurup's *Perunthachan* through her poem, "Thachante Makal." This work weaves themes of craftsmanship, spirituality, and self-discovery, presenting the complexities of human experience.

- ▶ Explores interconnectedness, transformation, and independence

"Thachante Makal" explores the themes of interconnectedness, transformation, and independence. The speaker, a carpenter's daughter, admires the divine creator of temple towers and asserts her desire for independence, rejecting the notion of being merely a floor chisel. This symbolizes her struggle against traditional constraints and her pursuit of a creative and autonomous life. The poem contrasts her strict upbringing with her joy in craftsmanship, presenting the tension between convention and innovation.

- ▶ Craftsmanship blends art, spirituality, and practical knowledge

The motif of craftsmanship is central, depicted as both mysterious and artistic. The transformation of wood into art reflects a deeper spiritual significance, blending nostalgia with symbolic insights. The speaker's father's teachings on ancient architectural texts emphasise the practical application of knowledge, presenting the harmony between theory and practice.

- ▶ Brother's loyalty contrasts with tragic fate, reflecting spirituality

The relationship between the speaker and her brother is significant, exploring themes of destiny, loyalty, and the human condition. Despite harsh criticism, the brother's enigmatic half-smile signifies his complex emotional landscape and unwavering devotion. His perception of trees as incomplete idols awaiting divine fulfilment showcases his unique blend of spirituality and craftsmanship. His early tragic death, predicted by an astrologer, contrasts sharply with his radiant loyalty and skill, adding a layer of poignant irony to the narrative.

- ▶ Mortality symbolizes vulnerability

The speaker's reflections on mortality and vulnerability are profound. She likens death to a serpent beneath her feet and a bloodstained chisel, symbolising constant threats. This awareness of mortality intertwines with her recognition of her limitations and the impossibility of emulating a fierce Rajput warrior. Instead, she embraces the gentleness and mastery of her craft, symbolized by a stone chisel, through which she learns deeper life lessons.

- ▶ The poem intertwines spirituality, craftsmanship, and self-discovery

The poem offers a stark contrast between an envious father, Perunthachan who kills his more talented son and Vishwakarma Prajapathi who tamed even the Sun God to lessen his daughter's suffering due to the Sun's heat of intense passion. The overarching dominance of Perunthachan is well conveyed through the attitude of the banyan tree.

The speaker's journey, blessed by her father, symbolises a quest for self-discovery, guided by celestial influences. Her introspection likened to an intricate anthill, reveals her deep examination of her thoughts and emotions. The haunting image of her loved brother, crafting a sandalwood idol of God Devendra for his sister as a sample of the bridegroom he desires for her, symbolises enduring sibling bonds and the integration of brother's love and craftsmanship.

## Summarised Overview

Sugathakumari's poem "Devadaasi" explores the themes of devotion, isolation, and existential questioning through the voice of a temple dancer. The speaker, a devadaasi, sits alone on the first step of the temple, stripped of traditional adornments, singing praises while remaining shrouded in shadows. Her solitude and worn appearance lead passersby to misunderstand her silence as madness, presenting a disconnect between her spiritual dedication and social perceptions. Despite the festive sounds and divine scents from above, she feels isolated and anguished, questioning the purpose of her talents and the divine's apparent absence. In her final act, she throws sweets onto the step as a gesture of enduring devotion, symbolising her unwavering commitment despite feeling abandoned.

Vijayalakshmi's "Thachante Makal" explores the journey of a carpenter's daughter who admires the divine creator of temple towers and seeks independence. Reflecting on her upbringing and joy in wood shavings, she contrasts traditional constraints with her creative spirit. Learning architecture from her father, she blends practical skills with theoretical knowledge. The poem portrays craftsmanship as mysterious and artistic, with

wood transforming into art, and depicts the speaker's deep bond with a loved one through their craftsmanship.

The speaker's brother views trees as incomplete idols, bringing sacred potential into tangible forms, yet faces an early death despite his devotion. The poem concludes with reflections on death, creativity, and spirituality. Urged by an asura chief to leave constraints behind, the speaker seeks her father's blessings and starts her journey, embracing her path with determination and introspection, ultimately deciding to leave her tools to avoid being overwhelmed by external pressures.

## Assignments

1. Examine the role of social perception in Sugathakumari's "Devadaasi."
2. Discuss the themes of interconnectedness and transformation in "Thachante Makal." How do these themes relate to the speaker's experiences and reflections?
3. Explore the concept of divine abandonment in Sugathakumari's "Devadaasi."
4. Reflect on how the poem "Thachante Makal" portrays traditional constraints versus creative spirit. How does the speaker navigate these opposing forces in her life and work?
5. Explore the theme of mortality in "Thachante Makal." How does the speaker's contemplation of death impact her worldview and artistic pursuits?

## Suggested Reading

1. Satchidanandan, K. *Sugathakumari: Selected Poems*. Sahitya Akademi, 2008.
2. Nair, Malini. *Lyrical Voices of Kerala: The Poetic World of Sugathakumari and Balamani Amma*. HarperCollins, 2014.

## Reference

1. Pandey, Anuradha D., and Kamala Nair. Ed. *Women Writing Gender: A Study of Devaki Jain, Sugathakumari and Others*. Prestige Books, 2002.
2. Rajeevan, P. Ed.. *Voices of Kerala: Selections from Malayalam Literature*. Sahitya Akademi, 2002

## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU

# Prose

## BLOCK-03

### Block Content

- Unit 1 : Mary Wollstonecraft : “Introduction to A Vindication of the Rights of Woman”
- Unit 2 : Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie : “We Should All Be Feminists”
- Unit 3 : Tejaswini Niranjana : “Translation, Colonialism and Rise of English”
- Unit 4 : Dorothy Parker : “Good Souls”

## Unit 1

# Introduction to A Vindication of the Rights of Woman

- Mary Wollstonecraft

## Learning Outcomes

Upon the completion of the unit, the learners will be able to:

- ▶ analyse Mary Wollstonecraft's key arguments in "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" and their historical context
- ▶ evaluate Wollstonecraft's critique of women's education and social roles in the 18<sup>th</sup> century society
- ▶ explain how Wollstonecraft's work relates to Enlightenment ideals and early feminist thought
- ▶ examine the rhetorical strategies and writing style Wollstonecraft employs in her introduction

## Background

The late 18<sup>th</sup> century was a time of great social and political upheaval in Europe and North America. The American Revolution had recently concluded, and the French Revolution was in full swing, sparking intense debates about human rights, democracy, and social equality. These events challenged traditional hierarchies and institutions, paving the way for new ideas about individual liberty and societal progress. It was in this context of radical change that Mary Wollstonecraft emerged as a pioneering voice for women's rights. Born in 1759 to a financially unstable family in London, Wollstonecraft had a difficult childhood marked by her father's alcoholism and abusive behaviour. Despite limited formal education, she was intellectually curious and largely self-taught.

As a young woman, Wollstonecraft worked various jobs, including lady's companion, schoolteacher, and governess. These experiences shaped her views on women's education and social status. In the 1780s, she moved to London and began working in publishing, becoming part of a circle of radical thinkers and writers.

Wollstonecraft's first book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), outlined her early ideas on female education. Her political treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) established her as an important voice in radical politics. However, it

was *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) that truly cemented her reputation as a feminist philosopher and social critic. This groundbreaking work was a product of the revolutionary spirit of the times, extending Enlightenment ideals of reason and individual rights to women in a way that was truly radical for the era. Wollstonecraft argued passionately that women were human beings deserving the same fundamental rights as men, challenging prevailing notions about gender roles and female capabilities.

The book was a wide-ranging critique of the limitations placed on women's education, legal rights, and social roles in the 18<sup>th</sup> century society. Wollstonecraft maintained that women only appeared inferior to men because they lacked education. She advocated for a rational education system that would cultivate women's minds and capacities, allowing them to develop their full potential as human beings and citizens.

## Keywords

Feminism, Enlightenment, Education, Gender roles, Equality, Rationality, Social reform

## Discussion

### 3.1.1 Mary Wollstonecraft

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) is a pioneering English writer, philosopher and advocate for women's rights who laid the foundation for modern feminism through her groundbreaking work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Born in London to a financially unstable family, Wollstonecraft had a difficult childhood marked by her father's alcoholism and abusive behaviour. Despite limited formal education, she was intellectually curious and self-taught.

► Pioneering feminist writer

► Various professions

As a young woman, Wollstonecraft worked as a lady's companion, schoolteacher and governess - experiences that shaped her views on women's education and social status. In the 1780s, she moved to London and began working as a translator and reviewer for publisher Joseph Johnson, becoming part of a circle of radical thinkers and writers.



Fig. 3.1.1. A portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft

- ▶ Wollstonecraft's works

Wollstonecraft's first book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), outlined her early ideas on female education. Her political treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1792) was written in response to Edmund Burke's criticism of the French Revolution, establishing her as an important voice in radical politics. However, it was this work that cemented her reputation as a feminist philosopher and social critic.

- ▶ In the wake of the French Revolution

### 3.1.2 Historical Context

The 1790s saw tumultuous changes across Europe in the wake of the French Revolution. Enlightenment ideals of reason, individual rights and social progress were challenging traditional hierarchies and institutions. It was against this revolutionary backdrop that Wollstonecraft composed her seminal work arguing for the rights of women. She was inspired by Enlightenment philosophy but went further in extending its principles of liberty and equality to women.

- ▶ Part of thinkers

Wollstonecraft was part of a group of radical thinkers in London, including William Godwin (whom she later married), Thomas Paine, and William Blake. These intellectuals were deeply engaged with the political and social upheavals of their time, debating ideas of democracy, human rights, and social reform.

### 3.1.3 Overview of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is a wide-ranging critique of the limitations placed on women's education, legal rights, and social roles in 18<sup>th</sup> century society. Wollstonecraft passionately argues that women are human beings deserving the same fundamental rights as men. She maintains that women only appear inferior to men because they lack education. The book's central thesis is that women should receive the same educational opportunities as men, which would allow them to contribute more fully to society.

► Books's arguments

Wollstonecraft criticises the frivolous and ornamental education given to upper-and middle-class girls, which renders them weak, artificial, and overly focused on emotions and appearance rather than reason and virtue. She argues that this inadequate education trapped women in limited domestic roles as wives and mothers, leaving them ignorant, economically dependent, and often unhappy. Instead, she advocates for a rational education system that would cultivate women's minds and capacities, allowing them to develop their full potential as human beings and citizens.

► Need for women's education

The book covers a range of interconnected topics, including marriage, motherhood, education, employment, and politics. Wollstonecraft challenges the notion that women are naturally inferior to men, arguing that perceived differences are the result of socialisation and a lack of opportunities. She calls for reforms in areas like property rights, divorce laws, and access to professions. While focused on middle-class women, the work also touches on issues of class and slavery.

► Touching various themes

#### 3.1.3.1 Reception and Influence

Although radical for its time, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* doesn't fully advocate for equality or women's suffrage. Wollstonecraft accepted some gender differences and traditional female roles. However, her core argument that women deserved equal educational and social opportunities to develop their rational and moral capacities was truly revolutionary. The book was generally well-received upon publication and influential in early feminist circles, though it later drew criticism in the more conservative 19<sup>th</sup> century. It had a significant impact on the women's rights movements in Great Britain and the United States. American women's rights advocates such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B.

► Well-reception of the work

Anthony, and Margaret Fuller were particularly inspired by Wollstonecraft's work.

### 3.1.4 Introduction to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

► Powerful opening

The "Introduction" to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* serves as a powerful opening statement for Wollstonecraft's groundbreaking work. It not only outlines her key arguments but also reflects the social, cultural, and literary contexts of late 18<sup>th</sup> century England.

#### 3.1.4.1 Social Context

Wollstonecraft begins the Introduction with a poignant observation:

*After considering the historic page, and viewing the living world with anxious solicitude, the most melancholy emotions of sorrowful indignation have depressed my spirits, and I have sighed when obliged to confess, that either nature has made a great difference between man and man, or that the civilization, which has hitherto taken place in the world, has been very partial.*

► Partiality

This opening sentence immediately establishes the emotional and intellectual foundation of Wollstonecraft's work. It also reflects the social context of the time, where the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason and progress challenged traditional hierarchies and institutions. Wollstonecraft's reference to "civilisation" being "partial" speaks to the growing awareness of social inequalities in her time.

► Impact of revolutions

The late 18<sup>th</sup> century was a period of significant social and political upheaval. The American Revolution had recently concluded, and the French Revolution was ongoing. These events sparked intense debates about human rights, democracy, and social equality. Wollstonecraft's work is very much a product of this revolutionary era, extending these new ideas about rights and equality to women. Moreover, the Industrial Revolution was beginning to transform British society, leading to urbanisation and changes in family structures. These shifts were creating new challenges and opportunities for women, particularly in the growing middle class. Wollstonecraft's critique of women's roles and education must be understood in this context of rapid social change.

### 3.1.4.2 Women's Oppression

Wollstonecraft quickly identifies what she sees as the core issue:

*I have turned over various books written on the subject of education, and patiently observed the conduct of parents and the management of schools; but what has been the result? A profound conviction that the neglected education of my fellow creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore.*

- ▶ Non-availability of education

This passage reflects the educational context of the time. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century England, formal education was primarily available to boys and men, particularly those from the upper and middle classes. Girls' education, if it existed at all, was typically focused on accomplishments like music, drawing, and needlework rather than academic subjects.

- ▶ Only superficial education for girls

The few schools for girls that did exist, such as the boarding schools critiqued by Wollstonecraft in her earlier work *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, often provided a superficial education aimed at making girls attractive for marriage prospects rather than developing their intellects. This system reflected and reinforced the prevailing view that women's primary roles were as wives and mothers.

- ▶ Against prevailing notions

Wollstonecraft's critique of this educational system was radical for its time. She argued that women's apparent inferiority was not innate but the result of inadequate education. This idea challenged prevailing notions about gender roles and capabilities, including influential theories like those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who argued in *Emile, Or Treatise on Education* for a limited and domestically focused education for women.

### 3.1.4.3 Stunted Growth

Wollstonecraft uses vivid metaphors to illustrate how women have been stunted:

*The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove, that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers that are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity.*

This metaphor reflects the cultural context of the time, where women, especially in the upper and middle classes, were often

- ▶ 18<sup>th</sup> century view of women

valued primarily for their beauty and ability to please men. The idea of women as ornamental rather than useful was deeply ingrained in the 18<sup>th</sup> century society. The metaphor also alludes to the cult of sensibility prevalent in 18<sup>th</sup> century literature and culture. This cultural trend emphasised emotional sensitivity and refined feelings, particularly in women. While initially seen as a positive trait, by Wollstonecraft's time, sensibility was increasingly criticised as encouraging weakness and artificiality in women.

- ▶ Use of natural imagery

Wollstonecraft's use of natural imagery (flowers, soil, leaves) also reflects the influence of Romanticism, a literary and artistic movement that was emerging in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Romantics often used nature metaphors to critique society and express emotional truths. However, Wollstonecraft's use of this imagery is more analytical and critical than those typically found in Romantic literature, reflecting her Enlightenment influences.

#### 3.1.4.4 Male Authors

Wollstonecraft places much of the blame for women's situation on male writers:

*One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men, who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than rational wives.*

- ▶ Domination of male writers

This critique reflects the literary context of the time. Most published works about women's education and roles were written by men. Influential writers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued for a limited and domestically focused education for women. Wollstonecraft directly challenges these male authors, arguing that their views have contributed to women's oppression. The literary landscape of 18<sup>th</sup> century England was dominated by male voices, even in genres popular with female readers, like novels and conduct books. Women writers were often marginalised or forced to publish anonymously. By directly confronting male authors and addressing women as rational beings, Wollstonecraft was asserting women's right to participate in intellectual discourse.

- ▶ Stereotyped women

Moreover, Wollstonecraft's critique extends beyond educational treatises to encompass the broader literary culture. She criticises the "books of instruction, written by men of

genius” that have had “the same tendency as more frivolous productions.” This likely refers to popular novels and poetry that often portrayed women in limited and stereotypical roles.

### 3.1.4.5 Wollstonecraft’s Enlightenment Influence

Wollstonecraft anticipates potential criticism of her work:

*Animated by this important object, I shall disdain to cull my phrases or polish my style—I aim at being useful, and sincerity will render me unaffected; for wishing rather to persuade by the force of my arguments, than dazzle by the elegance of my language, I shall not waste my time in rounding periods, nor in fabricating the turgid bombast of artificial feelings, which, coming from the head, never reach the heart.*

This passage reveals Wollstonecraft’s Enlightenment influences. The emphasis on reason, usefulness, and sincerity over ornate language or emotional appeals reflects Enlightenment values. It also challenges the prevailing literary style of the time, which often favoured elaborate prose, especially in works aimed at women. Wollstonecraft’s approach aligns her with other Enlightenment thinkers who prioritised clear and rational argumentation over rhetorical flourishes. This style was associated with masculine writing, and by adopting it, Wollstonecraft implicitly challenged gendered notions of authorship.

► Challenging gendered notions

Furthermore, her emphasis on being “useful” reflects the utilitarian strand of Enlightenment thought, which judged the value of actions and ideas by their practical benefits to society. By framing her work in these terms, Wollstonecraft positions women’s rights as a matter of social progress rather than just individual liberty.

► Utilitarian element

### 3.1.4.6 Women as Intellectual Equals

Wollstonecraft clearly states her intentions and target audience:

*My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their fascinating graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone.*

This direct address to women readers was unusual for the time. Most books aimed at women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were novels, conduct books, or works on domestic management. By

- ▶ Addressing women's issues

- ▶ Intellectual equals

- ▶ Challenging femininity

- ▶ Strength building

addressing women as “rational creatures” capable of engaging with serious philosophical ideas, Wollstonecraft challenges the prevailing assumptions about women’s intellectual capabilities and reading habits. The reference to women being in a “state of perpetual childhood” alludes to the legal doctrine of coverture, under which a married woman’s legal rights were subsumed by those of her husband. This system treated married women as dependents, similar to children, unable to own property or enter into contracts in their own names.

Wollstonecraft’s approach also contrasts with the popular conduct books of the time, which often addressed women in a patronising tone and focused on cultivating feminine virtues like modesty and obedience. By treating her female readers as intellectual equals, Wollstonecraft is modelling the kind of respect and serious consideration she argues women deserve in society at large.

### 3.1.4.7 Call for Women’s Strength

The “Introduction” builds to a powerful conclusion:

*I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them, that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings who are only the objects of pity and that kind of love, which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt.*

This call for women to develop strength of mind and body directly challenges 18<sup>th</sup> century gender norms. At the time, ideal femininity was associated with softness, delicacy, and refinement. Physical strength and intellectual rigour were seen as masculine traits. By encouraging women to cultivate these qualities, Wollstonecraft is proposing a radical redefinition of femininity. The reference to women as “objects of pity” and “love” reflects the chivalric ideals that still influenced gender relations in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. These ideals placed women on a pedestal but also reinforced their dependency and perceived weakness. Wollstonecraft argues that this seemingly benevolent attitude towards women is ultimately degrading.

Moreover, Wollstonecraft’s emphasis on bodily and mental strength was particularly radical. Physical exercise for women was generally discouraged, and female delicacy and even ill health were often seen as attractive. By advocating

for women's physical strength, Wollstonecraft challenged not just social norms but also prevailing medical theories about women's bodies.

#### 3.1.4.8 Criticising Women of Her Age

Wollstonecraft does not shy away from criticising the behaviour of women in her society:

*The education of women has, of late, been more attended to than formerly; yet they are still reckoned a frivolous sex, and ridiculed or pitied by the writers who endeavour by satire or instruction to improve them. It is acknowledged that they spend many of the first years of their lives in acquiring a smattering of accomplishments: meanwhile, strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves, the only way women can rise in the world--by marriage.*

This critique reflects the class context of Wollstonecraft's work. She focuses primarily on middle and upper-class women who had the luxury of spending time on "accomplishments" like music and drawing. Her criticism of women's focus on beauty and marriage reflects the limited options available to women of these classes for social and economic advancement. The reference to women being "ridiculed or pitied" by writers alludes to the satirical tradition in 18<sup>th</sup> century literature, which often mocked women's foibles. Works like Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* satirised what was seen as women's vanity and frivolity. Wollstonecraft argues that such satire, while ostensibly aimed at improving women, actually reinforces their subordinate status.

► Critique

Furthermore, Wollstonecraft's critique of women's focus on marriage reflects the economic realities of the time. With limited educational and professional opportunities, marriage was indeed one of the few ways for women to secure their economic future. By pointing out this harsh reality, Wollstonecraft highlights the systemic nature of women's oppression.

► Economic realities

#### 3.1.4.9 Gender Differences

Wollstonecraft takes a nuanced approach to the question of gender differences:

*In the government of the physical world, it is observable that the female, in general, is inferior to the male. The male*

*pursues, the female yields--this is the law of nature; and it does not appear to be suspended or abrogated in favour of woman. This physical superiority cannot be denied--and it is a noble prerogative!*

► On internal qualities

This acknowledgement of physical differences between men and women reflects the scientific understanding of the time. 18<sup>th</sup> century medical and scientific theories often emphasised women's physical inferiority. By conceding this point, Wollstonecraft can focus her arguments on intellectual and moral equality, areas where the scientific consensus was less settled. The language of "laws of nature" reflects the influence of Enlightenment science, which sought to uncover universal natural laws. However, Wollstonecraft's use of this concept is strategic. By framing physical differences as a "noble prerogative" of men, she subtly suggests that true nobility lies in moral and intellectual qualities, where she argues women can be equal.

► Complex interplay

Moreover, Wollstonecraft's approach here reflects the complex interplay between Enlightenment ideas of universal human rights and the period's understanding of natural differences. She navigates this tension by acknowledging physical differences while insisting on the more fundamental equality of human reason and moral capacity.

#### **3.1.4.10 Challenging Gender-based Limitations**

Wollstonecraft outlines her vision as to how society would benefit from the empowerment of women:

*Contending for the rights of women, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice.*

► Marriage as companionship

This view was shaped by the politics of the era, especially ideas about social contracts and human progress. Wollstonecraft argues that the advancement of society as a whole depends on the education and empowerment of women. This idea connects women's rights to broader Enlightenment concepts of social progress and the public good. The emphasis on women as "companions" to men reflects a shift in thinking about marriage in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The idea of companionate marriage, based

- ▶ Truth as “common to all”

on mutual affection and intellectual compatibility, was gaining ground, particularly among the middle classes. Wollstonecraft extends this idea, arguing that true companionship requires intellectual equality.

Furthermore, Wollstonecraft’s argument that truth must be “common to all” to be effective echoes Enlightenment ideals of universal reason and the democratisation of knowledge. By including women in this universal category, she challenges the gender-based limitations on intellectual discourse prevalent in her time.

### 3.1.4.11 Virute of Middle-Class Women

Throughout the “Introduction,” Wollstonecraft’s arguments reflect various philosophical influences prevalent in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century:

*I wish also to steer clear of an error, which many respectable writers have fallen into; for the instruction which has hitherto been addressed to women, has rather been applicable to LADIES, if the little indirect advice, that is scattered through Sandford and Merton, be excepted; but, addressing my sex in a firmer tone, I pay particular attention to those in the middle class, because they appear to be in the most natural state.*

- ▶ Thoughts on nature and society’s negative effects

These lines show Wollstonecraft discussing Rousseau’s thoughts on nature and society’s negative effects. However, she adapts these ideas to her own purposes, seeing middle-class women as closer to a “natural state” than aristocratic ladies. This reflects a broader trend in Enlightenment thought that idealised the middle class as a source of virtue and progress. The reference to *Sandford and Merton*, a popular children’s book by Thomas Day, shows Wollstonecraft’s familiarity with contemporary educational literature. Her critique of such works as offering only “little indirect advice” to women underscores her argument for more substantial and direct education for women.

### 3.1.5 Writing Style

Wollstonecraft’s writing style in the “Introduction” is notable for its passionate yet reasoned tone:

*Dismissing then those pretty feminine phrases, which the men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence, and despising that weak elegance of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manners, supposed to be the sexual characteristics of the weaker vessel, I wish to show that*

*elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex.*

► Emerging Romantic movement

This passage demonstrates Wollstonecraft's rhetorical skill in combining emotional appeal with logical argument. The use of irony in phrases like "pretty feminine phrases" and "weaker vessel" underscores her critique of patronising attitudes towards women. At the same time, her clear statement of purpose - to show that "elegance is inferior to virtue" - reflects her Enlightenment-influenced focus on moral development. Wollstonecraft's style also reflects the influence of the emerging Romantic movement in its passionate tone and use of vivid imagery. However, her emphasis on reason and her systematic approach to argument align her more closely with Enlightenment traditions of philosophical writing.

## Summarised Overview

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is a seminal work in the history of feminist thought. Published in 1792, it presents a passionate argument for women's education and emancipation, challenging the prevailing social norms and gender roles of 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. The introduction to the work sets the tone for Wollstonecraft's radical ideas. She begins by expressing her dismay at the state of women in society, attributing their perceived inferiority to a lack of proper education rather than any inherent deficiency. Wollstonecraft argues that the "neglected education" of women is the "grand source of misery" she observes in society.

A key theme in the introduction is Wollstonecraft's critique of the way women are portrayed and addressed in contemporary literature. She takes issue with male authors who, in her view, treat women as ornamental beings rather than rational creatures. This criticism extends to educational treatises, novels, and conduct books that reinforce limited and stereotypical roles for women. Wollstonecraft challenges the prevailing notion that women are naturally inferior to men. While acknowledging some physical differences, she insists that in matters of intellect and virtue, women have the same potential as men. She argues that apparent differences in capability are the result of socialisation and lack of opportunities, not inherent qualities.

The introduction also reveals Wollstonecraft's Enlightenment influences. She values reason, usefulness, and sincerity over ornate language or emotional appeals. This approach aligns her with other Enlightenment thinkers who prioritised clear and rational argumentation. By adopting this style, typically associated with male writers,

Wollstonecraft implicitly challenges gendered notions of authorship. A central argument in the introduction is that the advancement of society as a whole depends on the education and empowerment of women. Wollstonecraft contends that if women are not educated to be the intellectual equals and companions of men, it will “stop the progress of knowledge and virtue” in society at large.

Wollstonecraft’s writing style in the introduction is notable for its passionate yet reasoned tone. She combines emotional appeal with logical argument, using irony and vivid imagery to underscore her points. This style reflects influences from both the Enlightenment and the emerging Romantic movement. The introduction also touches on class issues, with Wollstonecraft focusing her critique primarily on middle and upper-class women. She argues that these women, with their focus on “accomplishments” like music and drawing rather than substantive education, are particularly ill-served by current social norms.

Throughout the introduction, Wollstonecraft presents a vision of women as rational, capable beings deserving of education and full participation in society. She challenges her female readers to “acquire strength, both of mind and body,” rejecting the notion that feminine virtues are synonymous with weakness.

## Assignments

1. How does Wollstonecraft critique the education of women in 18<sup>th</sup> century society?
2. What role does Enlightenment thought play in Wollstonecraft’s arguments?
3. How does Wollstonecraft challenge prevailing notions of femininity in her introduction?
4. Analyse Wollstonecraft’s writing style in the introduction.
5. How does Wollstonecraft link women’s rights to broader social progress?
6. Compare Wollstonecraft’s views on gender differences with those of her contemporaries.

## Suggested Reading

1. Smith, Amy Elizabeth. “Roles for Readers in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 32, no. 3, 1992, pp. 555–70. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/450921>.



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3. WILCOX, KIRSTIN R. "Vindicating Paradoxes: Mary Wollstonecraft's 'Woman.'" *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2009, pp. 447–67. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27867283>.
4. Ford, Thomas H. "Mary Wollstonecraft and the Motherhood of Feminism." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 3/4, 2009, pp. 189–205. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27740589>.

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1. Wollstonecraft, Mary. "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman – Introduction." *www.marxists.org*, [www.marxists.org/reference/archive/wollstonecraft-mary/1792/vindication-rights-woman/introduction.htm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/wollstonecraft-mary/1792/vindication-rights-woman/introduction.htm).
2. Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (a Feminist Literature Classic)*. Czechia, Good Press, 2023.
3. Berges, Sandrine. *The Routledge Guidebook to Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis, 2013.
4. Johnson, Claudia L., editor, *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*. Kiribati, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU

## Unit 2

# We Should All Be Feminists (TED Talk)

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

### Learning Outcomes

Upon the completion of the unit, the learners will be able to:

- ▶ analyse Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s key arguments in “We Should All Be Feminists” and their cultural context
- ▶ evaluate Adichie’s definition of feminism and its relevance to contemporary gender issues
- ▶ examine the rhetorical strategies Adichie employs in her TED Talk to engage and persuade her audience
- ▶ explain the impact and reception of Adichie’s talk in both academic and popular culture contexts

### Background

Discussions about gender equality have gained significant momentum worldwide in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Despite progress in many areas, issues of gender discrimination, unequal opportunities, and harmful stereotypes persist in various cultures and societies. It is against this backdrop that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a renowned Nigerian author, delivered her influential TED Talk “We Should All Be Feminists” in 2012.

Adichie, born in 1977 in Nigeria, emerged as a powerful voice in literature and cultural criticism. Her diverse educational background, spanning Nigeria and the United States, shaped her unique perspective on issues of gender, race, and identity. Adichie’s novels, including *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, had already established her as a significant literary figure before her TED Talk brought her ideas on feminism to a global audience.

TED Talks, which began in 1984 as a conference bringing together Technology, Entertainment, and Design, had by this time become a platform for sharing innovative ideas across a wide range of topics. These short, powerful talks, typically lasting around 18 minutes, had gained immense popularity for their ability to disseminate complex ideas in accessible formats to a global audience.

Adichie’s talk came at a time when the term “feminism” was often misunderstood or viewed negatively by many. Her approach to discussing gender equality aimed to make feminist ideas more accessible and relatable to a broad audience. By sharing personal anecdotes and observations from her experiences in Nigeria and the United States, Adichie grounded abstract concepts of gender inequality in everyday realities.

The talk’s impact extended far beyond the initial TEDx event where it was delivered. It was later published as a book-length essay in 2014, incorporated into academic curricula, and even sampled in popular music. Adichie’s clear and inclusive definition of feminism - “a person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes” - resonated with many and helped to reframe public discourse on gender equality.

## Keywords

Feminism, Gender equality, Cultural expectations, TED Talk, Nigerian perspective, Rhetorical strategies, Popular

## Discussion

### 3.2.1 Introduction to TED Talks

TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) is a non-profit organisation that has become famous worldwide for its short and powerful talks on a wide range of topics. TED began in 1984 as a conference where Technology, Entertainment and Design came together, but today, it covers almost every subject you can think of - from science and business to global issues and creativity. These talks are given in more than 100 languages, making them accessible to people all over the world. TED Talks feature expert speakers who share their knowledge and ideas in engaging and often inspiring ways. They typically last around 15-20 minutes, which is long enough to cover a topic in depth but short enough to hold people’s attention. These talks are usually given at official TED conferences or TED-affiliated events like TEDx, which are independently organised TED-style events. The goal of TED Talks is to spread ideas that can change attitudes, lives, and, ultimately, the world. They’ve become incredibly popular, with many talks being viewed millions of times online. TED Talks have covered everything

► Inspiring  
idea-sharing

from groundbreaking scientific discoveries to personal stories of overcoming adversity, and they often challenge viewers to think about familiar topics in new and innovative ways.

### 3.2.2 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian author and feminist thinker who has made a significant impact on literature and cultural discussions around the world. Born in 1977 in Enugu, Nigeria, Adichie grew up in the university town of Nsukka, where her father was a professor and her mother was the first female registrar at the University of Nigeria. This academic environment likely played a role in shaping Adichie's intellectual curiosity and love for learning. Initially, Adichie studied medicine and pharmacy at the University of Nigeria for a year and a half. However, at the age of 19, she made a bold decision to move to the United States to pursue her true passion: writing. In the U.S., she studied communication and political science at Drexel University in Philadelphia. Her thirst for knowledge didn't stop there - she went on to earn a master's degree in creative writing from Johns Hopkins University and another master's degree in African studies from Yale University. This diverse educational background has undoubtedly contributed to the depth and richness of her writing.

► Educational journey

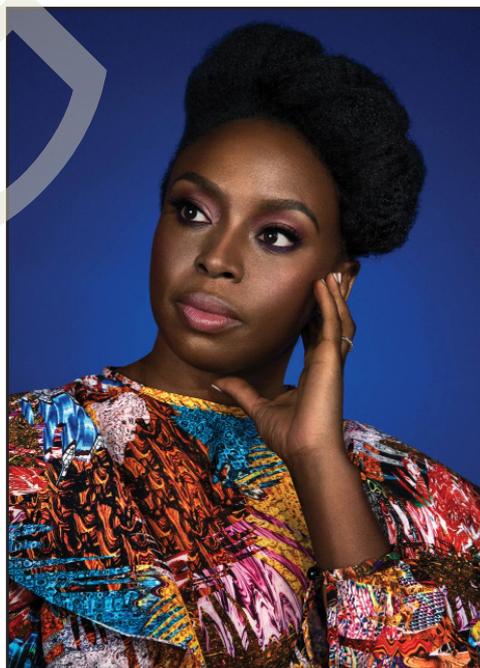


Fig. 3.2.1 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

► Works and awards

Adichie’s literary career has been marked by critical acclaim and numerous awards. Her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), tells the story of a young girl growing up in Nigeria under the influence of her fanatically religious father. This debut work won the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for Best First Book. Her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), set against the backdrop of the Nigerian Civil War, won the Orange Prize for Fiction (now known as the Women’s Prize for Fiction). Her third novel, *Americanah* (2013), which explores issues of race and identity through the experiences of Nigerian immigrants in the United States, won the National Book Critics Circle Award. These novels have been translated into over thirty languages, reaching readers across the globe and cementing Adichie’s status as one of the most important voices in contemporary literature.

► TED Talker

In addition to her novels, Adichie has written short stories and essays that have appeared in prestigious publications like *The New Yorker* and *Granta*. Her short story collection, *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), further showcases her ability to craft compelling narratives that often deal with the complexities of Nigerian life and the immigrant experience. However, Adichie’s influence extends beyond the realm of fiction. She has become known for her powerful speeches and essays on feminism, race, and identity. Her TED Talk “The Danger of a Single Story,” delivered in 2009, has been viewed over 27 million times, making it one of the most popular TED Talks ever. In this talk, she warns about the dangers of reducing complex human experiences to a single narrative, a theme that resonates throughout her work.



Fig. 3.2.2 Adichie presenting TEDx talk  
“We Should all Be Feminist”

► Feminist voice

Adichie's feminist advocacy took centre stage with her TEDx talk "We Should All Be Feminists," which was later published as a book-length essay in 2014. This work has had a profound impact on popular culture, even being sampled in Beyoncé's song "Flawless." Adichie followed this with another feminist text, *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017), written as a letter to a friend on how to raise a feminist daughter. These works have established Adichie as a leading voice in contemporary feminist discourse, known for her accessible and inclusive approach to discussing gender equality.

► Nigerian voice

Adichie divides her time between Nigeria and the United States, maintaining strong connections to both cultures. She is married and has a daughter, experiences which have likely informed her perspectives on gender roles and parenting. Despite her international success, Adichie remains deeply connected to her Nigerian roots, often addressing issues relevant to Nigerian society in her work. Her ability to bridge cultures and speak to universal human experiences while maintaining a distinct Nigerian voice has made her work resonate with readers and listeners around the world. Adichie continues to write, speak, and challenge her audience to think critically about issues of gender, race, and identity, cementing her place as one of the most influential voices in contemporary literature and cultural criticism.

### 3.2.3 We Should All Be Feminists (TED Talk)

(*Youtube* link to the TED Talk, "We Should All Be Feminists": [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU\\_qWc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU_qWc))

► On feminism

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk "We Should All Be Feminists" was delivered at TEDxEuston in London in 2012, and it has since become one of her most famous and influential speeches. The talk, which was later published as a book-length essay in 2014, presents a compelling and accessible argument as to why feminism is relevant and necessary in today's world. Adichie draws on her personal experiences as a Nigerian woman to illustrate the ways in which gender inequality manifests in everyday life, both in her home country and around the world. She challenges her audience to reconsider their preconceptions about feminism and gender roles, arguing that true equality benefits everyone, regardless of gender.

- ▶ Stories and observations

The talk begins with Adichie sharing a childhood memory of her friend Okoloma, who was the first person to call her a feminist. She recalls that at the time, she did not know what the word meant, but she could tell from his tone that it wasn't intended as a compliment. This anecdote serves as a starting point for Adichie's exploration of the negative connotations often associated with feminism. Throughout the talk, she weaves together personal stories, observations about society, and arguments for gender equality, creating a narrative that is both engaging and thought-provoking. Adichie's approach is notable for its balance of seriousness and humour, making complex ideas about gender accessible to a wide audience.

- ▶ Cultural expectations on gender role

One of the central themes of Adichie's talk is the way in which cultural expectations shape our understanding of gender roles. She shares many examples from her time in Nigeria, like the belief that a woman alone in a hotel is a sex worker and the idea that boys must pay on dates to show their masculinity. These anecdotes serve to illustrate how deeply ingrained gender stereotypes can be and how they can limit the opportunities and choices available to both women and men. Adichie argues that these expectations are learned rather than innate and that by changing the way we raise children and think about gender, we can create a more equitable society.

- ▶ Holding back women's potential

Adichie also addresses the real-world consequences of gender inequality, discussing how women are often taught to shrink themselves and prioritise marriage above all else. At the same time, men are expected to prove their worth through material success and dominance. She shares stories of women who feel they must hide their achievements or pretend to be less capable than they are in order to be seen as acceptable partners for men. These examples highlight the ways in which gender inequality can hold people back from reaching their full potential and living authentic lives.

- ▶ Feminism is not just women's issue.

Throughout the talk, Adichie emphasises that feminism is not just a women's issue but a human rights issue that affects everyone. She argues that the current system of gender roles and expectations is harmful to both women and men, limiting their choices and forcing them into narrow and predefined roles. By framing feminism as a universal concern, Adichie invites all listeners, regardless of gender, to join the cause and work towards a more equitable world.

One of the most powerful aspects of Adichie's talk is her vision for the future. She argues that by changing the way we

- ▶ Call to change vision

- ▶ Acceptance of the talk

- ▶ Defining feminism

- ▶ Need to change gender roles

raise children and think about gender, we can create a world where people are free to be their authentic selves, unburdened by restrictive gender roles. She encourages her audience to imagine a society where we focus on ability and interest rather than gender when raising children and where both men and women are free to express their full range of emotions and ambitions without fear of judgment or ridicule.

Thus, Adichie's "We Should All Be Feminists" TED Talk has had a significant impact since its delivery in 2012. It has been viewed millions of times online, translated into numerous languages, and even sampled in popular music. The talk has sparked conversations about gender roles and equality around the world and has helped to make feminist ideas more accessible to a broader audience.

### 3.2.4 Key Themes and Arguments

Adichie's TED Talk covers several key themes and makes a number of important arguments about gender equality and feminism. One of the most significant themes is the definition of feminism itself. Adichie provides a clear and inclusive definition, stating: "Feminist: a person who believes in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes." This straightforward definition is important because it strips away much of the negative baggage often associated with the term "feminist." By framing feminism in this way, Adichie invites her audience to reconsider their preconceptions and potentially embrace the label themselves. She argues that this simple definition is at the heart of what feminism is really about - equality between men and women in all aspects of life.

Another central theme in Adichie's talk is the impact of cultural expectations and gender roles on both women and men. Throughout her speech, she provides numerous examples of how societal norms shape our behaviour and limit our potential. For instance, she discusses how women are often expected to be primarily concerned with marriage and family, while men are pressured to be financially successful and dominant. Adichie argues that these expectations are harmful to everyone. She says, "We do a great disservice to boys in how we raise them. We stifle the humanity of boys. We define masculinity in a very narrow way. Masculinity is a hard, small cage, and we put boys inside this cage." This quote highlights how rigid gender roles can be damaging to men as well as women, forcing them to suppress parts of their personality and limiting their emotional expression.

► Real-world stories

Adichie also explores the real-world consequences of gender inequality. She shares stories of women who feel they must hide their achievements or pretend to be less capable than they are in order to be seen as acceptable partners for men. One particularly powerful example is her anecdote about a female friend in advertising who felt slighted by her boss but was afraid to speak up: “She didn’t want to speak up because she didn’t want to seem aggressive. She let her resentments simmer.” This story illustrates how gender expectations can silence women and prevent them from advocating for themselves in professional settings. Adichie argues that these kinds of situations, repeated over and over, contribute to a world where women are systematically disadvantaged and their potential is often unrealized.

► On raising children

A significant portion of Adichie’s talk focuses on the importance of raising children differently to create a more equal society. She suggests that many of the problems stemming from gender inequality could be addressed by changing how we socialise children from a young age. Adichie proposes, “What if, in raising children, we focus on ability instead of gender? What if we focus on interest instead of gender?” This idea challenges parents and educators to reconsider how they treat boys and girls, suggesting that by focusing on individual abilities and interests rather than a gender-based expectations, we can create a more equitable and fulfilling world for everyone.

► A universal issue

Adichie also addresses the universality of feminism, arguing that it’s not just a women’s issue but a human right issue that affects everyone. She states, “Gender as it functions today is a grave injustice. We should all be angry. Anger has a long history of bringing about positive change. But I am also hopeful, because I believe deeply in the ability of human beings to remake themselves for the better.” By framing feminism as a universal concern, Adichie invites all listeners, regardless of gender, to join the cause and work towards a more equitable world. She argues that a more equal society would benefit everyone, not just women, by allowing all individuals to reach their full potential.

► Inspiring

Throughout her talk, Adichie challenges her audience to question their assumptions about gender and to consider how these assumptions might be limiting both themselves and others. She encourages people to be more aware of the subtle ways in which gender inequality manifests in everyday

life, from the way we speak to the expectations we place on ourselves and others. By raising awareness of these issues, Adichie hopes to inspire her audience to take action in their own lives to promote gender equality.

### 3.2.5 Adichie's Rhetorical Strategies

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk "We Should All Be Feminists" is particularly effective due to her skilful use of various rhetorical strategies. One of the most prominent strategies she employs is the use of personal anecdotes. Throughout the talk, Adichie shares stories from her own life and the lives of her friends and acquaintances. These personal stories serve multiple purposes. Firstly, they make the abstract concept of gender inequality concrete and relatable. When Adichie talks about her experience of being refused entry to a hotel because she was a woman alone, or her friend who was afraid to speak up at work, these stories bring the issues of gender inequality to life in a way that statistics or general statements cannot. Secondly, these anecdotes help the audience connect emotionally with Adichie's arguments. By sharing personal experiences, she invites the audience to empathise with her and the people in her stories, making her arguments more persuasive.

► Personal anecdotes

Another effective rhetorical strategy Adichie uses is humour. Despite the serious subject matter of her talk, Adichie incorporates moments of levity throughout. For example, when discussing the various labels she considered for herself (like "Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men And Who Likes To Wear Lip Gloss And High Heels For Herself And Not For Men"), she delivers the line with a touch of self-deprecating humour. This use of humour serves several purposes. It helps to keep the audience engaged, preventing the tone from becoming too heavy or preachy. It also helps to disarm potential resistance to her arguments by creating a friendly and approachable tone. Additionally, by laughing at some of the absurdities of gender expectations, Adichie encourages her audience to critically examine these expectations in their own lives.

► Humorous tone

Adichie also makes effective use of inclusive language throughout her talk. She consistently uses the pronoun "we" when discussing the need for change, creating a sense of shared responsibility and common ground with her audience. For example, when she says, "We should all be angry. Anger has a long history of bringing about positive change," she

► Inclusiveness

includes herself and her audience in the call to action. This inclusive language helps to create a sense of unity and shared purpose, encouraging the audience to see themselves as part of the solution rather than passive listeners.

► Clarity

Another key rhetorical strategy is Adichie's use of clear definitions and explanations. By providing a straightforward definition of feminism "a person who believes in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes" Adichie helps to dispel misconceptions and make the concept more accessible to a broader audience. She also takes care to explain her reasoning clearly, often using analogies or examples to illustrate her points. This clarity and accessibility are crucial in making her arguments persuasive to a wide range of listeners, including those who might initially be skeptical of feminist ideas.

► Repetitive phrases

Finally, Adichie makes effective use of repetition and parallel structure in her speech. The phrase "We should all be feminists" is repeated several times, serving as a refrain that reinforces her main argument. She also uses parallel structure in many of her sentences, such as when she says, "We teach girls shame. *Close your legs. Cover yourself.*" This repetitive structure helps to emphasise her points and makes her speech more memorable and impactful.

► Beyoncé and Adichie

### 3.2.6 Impact and Reception

The impact of Adichie's "We Should All Be Feminists" talk extended into popular culture, with parts of it being featured in a well-known song by a major American pop star, Beyoncé. This brought Adichie's ideas to an even wider audience, especially among younger people. The phrase "We should all be feminists" became a rallying cry for gender equality, appearing on various merchandise and in social media campaigns. It helped spark conversations about feminism and gender roles in many different contexts, from classrooms to dinner tables.

► In curricula

### 3.2.7 Beyonce and Adichie

In the academic world, Adichie's talk and subsequent book have been widely used as introductory texts on feminism. They've been incorporated into curricula at various educational levels, from high schools to universities, helping to shape discussions about gender equality among young people. While the talk has been widely praised, it has also faced some criticism. Some have argued that Adichie's perspective is primarily focused on the experiences of middle-class, educated



Fig.3.2.3 A scene from Beyoncé’s performance in *Flawless* (Youtube source: <https://youtu.be/IyUWOnS9BY?feature=shared>)

Adichie’s “We Should All Be Feminists” talk reached new heights when Beyoncé featured it in her 2013 hit song *Flawless*. This collaboration brought Adichie’s powerful feminist message to millions of listeners worldwide. The inclusion of Adichie’s words in such a popular song showcased how academic ideas can successfully merge with pop culture, amplifying important social messages. This partnership between a respected author and a global music icon demonstrated the potential for intellectual concepts to resonate with broader audiences through the medium of popular music. It highlighted how different forms of art and media can work together to promote awareness of significant social issues.

women and doesn’t fully address the intersectionality of feminism with other forms of oppression, such as racism or classism. This has led to broader discussions about the need for feminism to be inclusive and to address multiple forms of discrimination simultaneously.

► Lasting impact

Overall, Adichie’s TED Talk has had a lasting impact on public discourse about feminism and gender equality. It has helped to reframe these issues for a new generation and has contributed to ongoing conversations about how to create a more equitable society for all genders.

## Summarised Overview

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk "We Should All Be Feminists" is a powerful exploration of feminism and gender equality in the modern world. Delivered in 2012 and later published as an essay, this talk has become a significant text in contemporary feminist discourse.

Adichie begins by recounting personal experiences that illustrate the pervasiveness of gender inequality in everyday life. She shares anecdotes from her childhood in Nigeria and her experiences as an adult, using these stories to highlight how cultural expectations and societal norms shape our understanding of gender roles. A key aspect of Adichie's talk is her clear and inclusive definition of feminism as the belief in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes. This straightforward definition serves to demystify the term and make it more accessible to a broad audience.

Throughout the talk, Adichie addresses several key themes. She discusses how gender roles limit both women and men, arguing that societal expectations of masculinity can be as harmful as those placed on women. She emphasizes the importance of raising children with a focus on individual abilities rather than gender-based expectations. Adichie's rhetorical strategies contribute significantly to the talk's effectiveness. She uses personal anecdotes to make abstract concepts relatable, employs humor to engage her audience, and uses inclusive language to create a sense of shared responsibility for change.

The impact of "We Should All Be Feminists" has been substantial. It has been incorporated into academic curricula, sparked discussions about gender equality in various forums, and even influenced popular culture, with parts of the talk being featured in a Beyoncé song. While widely praised, the talk has also faced some criticism, particularly regarding its focus on middle-class experiences and its handling of intersectionality. Nevertheless, it remains an influential text that has helped to reframe public discourse on feminism and gender equality for a new generation.

## Assignments

1. How does Adichie use personal anecdotes to illustrate gender inequality?
2. Analyze Adichie's definition of feminism and its implications.
3. How does Adichie address the impact of gender roles on both women and men?
4. Evaluate the effectiveness of Adichie's rhetorical strategies in her TED Talk.
5. Discuss the impact of "We Should All Be Feminists" on popular culture and academic discourse.
6. How does Adichie's Nigerian background inform her perspective on feminism?

## Suggested Reading

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## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

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## Unit 3

# “Translation, Colonialism and Rise of English”

- Tejaswini Niranjana

## Learning Outcomes

Upon the completion of the unit, the learners will be able to:

- ▶ analyse the role of translation in colonial power structures and its impact on Indian society
- ▶ evaluate the influence of Western philosophical concepts on colonial translation practices
- ▶ examine the connection between translation, Orientalist scholarship, and the implementation of English education in India
- ▶ critically assess the lasting effects of colonial translation practices on post-colonial cultural and linguistic dynamics

## Background

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, as former colonies grappled with the lingering effects of imperialism, scholars began to examine the subtle ways in which colonial power had shaped and continued to influence postcolonial societies. This academic movement, known as postcolonial studies, sought to unravel the complex relationships between language, culture, and power that had been forged during centuries of colonial rule.

Imagine a world where the language you speak, the books you read, and even the way you think about your own culture have been profoundly shaped by a foreign power. This was the reality for many colonized peoples, and it's the world that Tejaswini Niranjana explores in her groundbreaking work on translation and colonialism.

Niranjana, an Indian cultural theorist and translator, grew up in a country still wrestling with the legacy of British colonial rule. India's educational system, legal framework, and much of its public discourse were conducted in English, a language that had been imposed through colonial policies. This linguistic dominance was not merely a practical matter but a reflection of deeper power structures that continued to influence Indian society long after independence.

In her essay “Translation, Colonialism and Rise of English,” Niranjana looks into the historical processes that led to this situation. She argues that translation was not just a neutral act of converting text from one language to another, but a powerful tool used by colonizers to shape perceptions of the colonized cultures.

Think of translation as a lens through which one culture views another. Niranjana shows how this lens was often distorted by colonial interests, creating images of Indian culture that justified British rule. For example, translations of Indian texts often emphasized aspects that portrayed Indians as mystical, backward, or in need of civilizing influence – ideas that conveniently aligned with colonial narratives.

Niranjana’s work is like a detective story, uncovering the hidden ways in which seemingly innocent acts of translation carried deep political implications. She examines the writings of influential figures like William Jones, James Mill, and Thomas Macaulay, showing how their translations and interpretations of Indian culture laid the groundwork for policies that would reshape Indian society, particularly through the introduction of English education.

## Keywords

Postcolonial studies, Translation theory, Orientalism, Cultural representation, English education in India, Linguistic imperialism, Colonial discourse

## Discussion

### 3.3.1 Tejaswini Niranjana

Tejaswini Niranjana, born on 26 July 1958 in Dharwad, India, is a distinguished Indian cultural theorist, translator, and author who has made significant contributions to the fields of cultural studies, gender studies, translation, and ethnomusicology. As the daughter of Kannada playwright and novelist Kulakunda Shiva Rao (known as Niranjana) and writer Anupama Niranjana, she was immersed in a rich literary environment from an early age. This background undoubtedly influenced her future academic pursuits and intellectual interests.

► Whereabouts

Niranjana’s academic journey is both diverse and impressive. She completed her M.A. in English and Aesthetics from the University of Bombay, showcasing her early interest in literary studies. Her pursuit of knowledge led her to obtain an MPhil

► Academic journey

in Linguistics from the University of Pune, demonstrating her keen interest in the intricacies of language. Niranjana's academic prowess culminated in her earning a PhD from the University of California, Los Angeles, solidifying her position as a scholar of international repute.



Fig. 3.3.1 Tejaswini Niranjana

► Accolades

Throughout her career, Niranjana has garnered numerous accolades for her work. In 2021, she was awarded the American Literary Translators Association Prize for Prose Fiction Translation for her translation titled *No Presents Please*, a collection of short stories by Jayant Kaikini. This same translation also earned her the prestigious DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2019, which she shared with Kaikini. These awards not only recognise Niranjana's skill as a translator but also highlight her ability to bridge cultural and linguistic gaps through her work.

► Testaments

Her contributions to the field of translation have been further acknowledged through awards such as the Karnataka Sahitya Akademi Award for Best Translation in 1994. This recognition early in her career underscores the consistent quality and impact of her work over the decades. More recently, Niranjana was awarded the 2018 Humanities and Social Sciences Prestigious Fellowship from the Research Grants Council, Hong Kong, a testament to her ongoing influence and relevance in the academic world.

Currently, Niranjana holds the esteemed position of Director of the Centre for Inter-Asian Research and Dean of Online Programmes at Ahmedabad University. This role allows her

► Notable positions

to shape academic discourse and research at a high level, influencing the next generation of scholars and thinkers. Her journey to this position includes several notable appointments. She was a co-founder and senior fellow at the Centre for Study of Culture and Society in Bangalore, where she played a crucial role in shaping cultural studies in India. Her expertise has been sought by institutions worldwide, leading to visiting professorships at various renowned universities.

► “Jahaji Music”

Niranjana’s work extends beyond traditional academic boundaries. She has been involved in innovative projects that blend her interests in culture, music, and migration. For instance, she conceptualised and co-produced “Jahaji Music,” a documentary that explores musical forms in the Indian diaspora in the Caribbean. This project, starring Indian-Portuguese musician Remo Fernandes, demonstrates Niranjana’s ability to connect diverse cultural threads and explore the intersections of gender, music, and migration.

► Interdisciplinary approach

Her book *Musicophilia in Mumbai* (2020) further showcases her interdisciplinary approach. In this work, Niranjana examines the cultural, political, and geographical factors that contributed to Mumbai’s prominence as a centre for Hindustani music. Her research process for this project, which she describes as a combination of ethnographic work, archival research, and numerous interviews, exemplifies her thorough and multifaceted approach to scholarship. Beyond her academic work, Niranjana has been involved in social and political causes. In 2009, she was part of a group of 180 Indian academics who opposed Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code on the grounds that it was anti-democratic. This involvement showcases her commitment to using her academic platform to advocate for social justice and equality.

► Showcases complex interrelationships

### 3.3.2 Context of “Translation, Colonialism and Rise of English”

Niranjana’s chapter “Translation, Colonialism and Rise of English,” originally published in *Economic and Political Weekly* in 1990, is a pivotal work that explores the complex interrelationships between translation practices, colonial power structures, and the ascendancy of the English language in India. Published in the edited volume *Rethinking English: Essays in Literature, Language, History* (1991), edited by Svati Joshi, this essay offers a critical examination of how translation served as a tool for colonial domination and profoundly shaped the cultural and educational landscape of India.

- ▶ Context of the essay

The context in which this work was written is crucial for understanding its significance. The essay emerged during a period when postcolonial studies were gaining prominence in academic circles. Scholars were beginning to critically examine the lingering effects of colonialism on language, culture, and education in formerly colonised nations. Niranjana's work contributes significantly to this discourse by focusing specifically on the role of translation in the colonial project and its lasting impact on Indian society.

- ▶ Building on strong foundation

The late 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a growing awareness of the power dynamics embedded in language and cultural representation. Scholars like Edward Said had already begun to critique the ways in which Western academia had constructed and represented the "Orient". Niranjana's work builds on this foundation but takes a unique approach by focusing on translation as a key mechanism through which colonial power was exercised and maintained.

- ▶ Challenging colonial dominance

Moreover, the essay was written at a time when India was still grappling with the legacy of British colonialism in its educational system and cultural institutions. The dominance of English in higher education and many spheres of public life was (and continues to be) a contentious issue. Niranjana's work provides a historical perspective on how this dominance was established, offering valuable insights for contemporary debates about language policy and cultural identity in postcolonial India. It's also worth noting that Niranjana's essay engages with and builds upon the work of poststructuralist thinkers like Jacques Derrida. This theoretical framework allows her to deconstruct the assumptions underlying colonial translation practices and to reveal the power dynamics at play in seemingly neutral acts of linguistic and cultural transfer.

### 3.3.3 Detailed Summary and Analysis

- ▶ Statement of argument

Niranjana begins her essay by establishing the fundamental connection between translation and colonial power. She argues that translation was not merely a neutral act of linguistic transfer but a potent tool in the hands of the colonisers. This argument is encapsulated in a key passage: "Translation as a practice shapes, and takes shape within, the asymmetrical relations of power that operate under colonialism. What is at stake here is the representation of the colonized, who need to be produced in such a manner as to justify colonial domination, and to beg for the English book by themselves."

- Desire tool of coloniser

This powerful statement sets the tone for the entire essay and outlines its central thesis. Niranjana suggests that translation was used strategically to create a particular image of the colonised that would make colonial rule seem necessary and even desirable. The reference to “begging for the English book” is particularly poignant, as it highlights how the colonised were made to desire the very tools of their own subjugation. This idea of creating a desire for the coloniser’s language and culture is a recurring theme in postcolonial studies. Niranjana’s work provides a detailed examination of how this desire was manufactured through translation practices.

- Colonial contexts underpinning translation

Niranjana goes on to discuss how Western philosophical notions of reality, representation, and knowledge underpin translation in the colonial context. She argues that these concepts rendered invisible what Jacques Derrida calls “logocentric metaphysics.” This philosophical framework, according to Niranjana, allowed translation to function as a “philosopheme,” or a basic unit of philosophical thought that is taken for granted and not subjected to further analysis. She writes: “Here I should point out that classical philosophical discourse does not merely engender a practice of translation that is then employed for the purposes of colonial domination; I contend that, simultaneously, translation in the colonial context creates and supports a conceptual economy which works into western philosophy to function as a philosopheme, a congealed base unit which does not require further breaking down through analysis.” This passage is significant because it highlights how translation not only reflected existing philosophical assumptions but also reinforced and perpetuated them. By presenting translated texts as transparent representations of reality, colonial translators were able to naturalise their own cultural perspectives and present them as universal truths.

- Translation reinforcing the colonial rule

The essay then examines the specific ways in which translation was deployed in the colonial context. Niranjana writes: “Translation is thus deployed in different kinds of discourses—philosophy, historiography, education, missionary-writing, travel-writing—to renew and perpetuate colonial domination.” This passage illustrates how translation permeated various aspects of colonial discourse, serving to reinforce and legitimise colonial rule across multiple domains of knowledge production. By examining translation’s role in these diverse fields, Niranjana demonstrates the pervasive nature of colonial power and how it operated through seemingly benign cultural practices.

► William Jones' translation

Niranjana pays particular attention to the work of William Jones, a British Orientalist who played a crucial role in introducing Indian texts to European audiences through translation. She argues that Jones' translations, while aimed at revealing the "greatness" of Indian civilisation, actually served to construct a particular version of culture that justified colonial rule. She writes: "Jones' construction of the 'Hindus' [presents them] as a submissive, indolent nation unable to appreciate the fruits of freedom, desirous of being ruled by an absolute power, and sunk deeply in the mythology of an ancient religion." This representation of Indians as inherently submissive and incapable of self-governance provided a convenient justification for British rule. Niranjana argues that such translations created "strategies of containment" that fixed colonised cultures as static and unchanging, rather than as historically constructed. This idea of cultural persistence is crucial to understanding how translation served the colonial project. By presenting Indian culture as timeless and unchanging, colonial translators were able to justify their own interventions as necessary for progress and modernisation.

► Impact of translations

The essay also examines the work of James Mill, whose book *History of British India* relied heavily on translations to construct a damning portrait of Indian civilisation. Niranjana writes: "Mill embeds in his text several quotations from the writings of Captain Wilford (also one of Hegel's authorities) in *Asiatic Researches*, who says that 'The Hindu system of geography, chronology, and history, are all equally monstrous and absurd'." This passage demonstrates how translations were selectively used to paint Indian knowledge systems as backward and irrational, further reinforcing the perceived need for British intervention and rule. Niranjana's analysis of Mill's work is particularly important because it shows how translation practices influenced not only literary representation but also historical scholarship and policy-making.

Niranjana then traces how these translated representations of India fed into the discourse of "improvement" that was used to justify the introduction of English education in India. She discusses the views of Charles Grant, an influential figure in the East India Company, who argued that English education would free the minds of Indians from the "tyranny" of their priests and allow them to develop individual consciences. Niranjana writes: "Grant's treatise argued that the 'lamentably degenerate and base Hindus,' 'governed by malevolent and licentious passions' and possessed of only a 'feeble sense of

- ▶ Translations using negatively

moral obligation,' were 'sunk in misery' due to their religion. Supporting his allegations with copious quotations from Orientalist and missionary translations of Indian texts, Grant contended that only education in English would free the minds of the Hindus from their priests' tyranny and allow them to develop individual consciences." This passage highlights how translation was used not only to represent Indian culture negatively but also to propose solutions that would further entrench colonial power. The idea that English education was necessary for moral and intellectual development became a key justification for colonial educational policies.

- ▶ Intermediary between coloniser and colonised

The essay culminates in a discussion of Thomas Macaulay's *Minute on Indian Education*, which called for the creation of "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." Niranjana argues that this vision of creating a class of Indian interpreters was made possible by the groundwork laid by colonial translation practices. She writes: "Macaulay's brother-in-law, Charles Trevelyan, wrote how the influence of the indigenous elite would secure the 'permanence' of the change wrought by western education: 'Our subjects have set out on a new career of improvement: they are about to have a new character imprinted on them.'" This passage underscores how translation and education were seen as complementary tools for reshaping Indian society and creating a class of Indians who would serve as intermediaries between the colonisers and the colonised masses.

- ▶ Translation for colonial domination

### 3.3.4 Significance of the Essay

Niranjana's essay analyses how translation served as a crucial tool for colonial domination in India. By examining the works of key figures like William Jones, James Mill, and Thomas Macaulay, she demonstrates how translation practices shaped colonial perceptions of India and Indians, ultimately paving the way for the introduction of English education and the creation of a colonised elite class.

- ▶ Translation as politically charged

The significance of Niranjana's work lies in its examination of translation not as a neutral act, but as a politically charged practice deeply implicated in colonial power structures. Her analysis helps us understand the complex ways in which language and translation were weaponised in the colonial project, and how these practices continue to shape postcolonial realities. The essay challenges us to rethink our understanding of translation and its role in cultural exchange. By highlighting

the power dynamics inherent in translation, particularly in colonial contexts, she encourages a more nuanced and critical approach to cross-cultural communication and representation. This perspective is particularly valuable in our increasingly globalised world, where issues of cultural translation and representation remain highly relevant.

Moreover, Niranjana's work provides important insights into the historical processes that led to the dominance of English in India's educational and cultural institutions. By tracing the connections between translation practices, Orientalist scholarship, and educational policies, she offers a comprehensive view of how linguistic and cultural hierarchies were established and maintained. The essay also contributes to broader discussions about the nature of knowledge production in colonial and postcolonial contexts. By showing how translation practices shaped not only literary representation but also historical and philosophical discourses, Niranjana reveals the far-reaching impacts of colonial knowledge systems.

The essay's relevance is evident in the way it has informed scholarship on translation and postcolonialism. Niranjana's work has paved the way for a more nuanced understanding of how language and translation operate in contexts of power imbalance, not only in colonial settings but also in contemporary global relations. In the Indian context, Niranjana's analysis remains pertinent to ongoing debates about language policy, cultural identity, and the role of English in education and public life. As India continues to negotiate its linguistic and cultural diversity in the shadow of its colonial past, Niranjana's insights provide a valuable historical perspective and a framework for critical engagement with these issues.

#### ► Impacts

#### ► The essay's relevance

## Summarised Overview

Tejaswini Niranjana's essay "Translation, Colonialism and Rise of English" offers a critical examination of the role translation played in establishing and maintaining colonial power in India. Her work is situated within the broader field of postcolonial studies, which seeks to understand the lasting impacts of colonialism on formerly colonized societies.

Niranjana argues that translation was not a neutral act of linguistic transfer but a powerful tool wielded by colonizers to shape perceptions of Indian culture and justify

colonial rule. She demonstrates how Western philosophical concepts of reality, representation, and knowledge underpinned colonial translation practices, allowing them to function as unquestioned “philosophemes” that reinforced colonial power structures.

The essay analyzes the works of key figures in colonial India, such as William Jones, James Mill, and Thomas Macaulay. Niranjana shows how their translations and interpretations of Indian texts and culture created a particular image of India as backward, irrational, and in need of Western intervention. This representation, she argues, served to justify colonial policies, particularly in the realm of education.

Niranjana pays special attention to the introduction of English education in India, tracing how translated representations of Indian culture led into the discourse of “improvement” used to justify this policy. She examines how figures like Charles Grant argued for English education as a means of freeing Indian minds from the perceived tyranny of their own culture and religion.

The essay culminates in a discussion of Macaulay’s infamous Minute on Indian Education, which called for creating a class of Indians who would be “interpreters” between the British and the masses. Niranjana argues that this vision was made possible by the groundwork laid by colonial translation practices.

Throughout her analysis, Niranjana demonstrates how translation permeated various aspects of colonial discourse, including philosophy, historiography, education, and travel writing. She argues that these translation practices created “strategies of containment” that fixed colonized cultures as static and unchanging, rather than as historically constructed.

The significance of Niranjana’s work lies in its revelation of the complex ways in which language and translation were weaponized in the colonial project. By showing how translation shaped not only literary representation but also historical and philosophical discourse, she demonstrates the far-reaching impacts of colonial knowledge systems.

## Assignments

1. How did translation serve as a tool for colonial domination in India?
2. What role did Western philosophical concepts play in shaping colonial translation practices?
3. How did translated representations of India influence colonial educational policies?

4. Analyze the impact of William Jones translations on the British perception of Indian culture.
5. How did Macaulay's "Minute on Indian Education" build upon earlier colonial translation practices?
6. Evaluate the lasting effects of colonial translation practices on postcolonial Indian society.

## Suggested Reading

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## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

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## Unit 4

# “Good Souls”

- Dorothy Parker

### Learning Outcomes

Upon the completion of the unit, the learners will be able to:

- ▶ analyse the role of translation in colonial power structures and its impact on Indian society
- ▶ evaluate the influence of Western philosophical concepts on colonial translation practices
- ▶ examine the connection between translation, Orientalist scholarship, and the implementation of English education in India
- ▶ critically assess the lasting effects of colonial translation practices on post-colonial cultural and linguistic dynamics

### Background

Imagine a woman in the early 1900s, armed with nothing but her wit and a sharp pen, taking on the social norms of her time. This was Dorothy Parker, a writer who used humor like a scalpel, dissecting the absurdities of human behavior with surgical precision. Born in 1893, Parker grew up in a world that was rapidly changing. The Victorian era was fading, and a new century was dawning, bringing with it new ideas about women’s roles, social etiquette, and personal freedom. It was a time of flappers and jazz, of speakeasies and suffragettes. But beneath the glittering surface of the Roaring Twenties, many old attitudes and expectations still lingered.

Parker’s life was not an easy one. She lost her mother at a young age and had a difficult relationship with her father and stepmother. But these challenges seemed to sharpen her observational skills and her wit. She found her voice in writing, starting her career at magazines like Vogue and Vanity Fair.

Picture a group of writers, artists, and critics gathering around a table at the Algonquin Hotel in New York City. This was the famous Algonquin Round Table, and Parker was right at its center. Here, she honed her quick wit and memorable quips, becoming known as one of the sharpest tongues in New York. Parker’s writing often focused on the everyday

interactions and social rituals that most people took for granted. She had a knack for spotting the hidden absurdities in polite society, the ways in which people's attempts to be kind or proper could sometimes backfire or reveal deeper truths about human nature.

Her short story "Good Souls" is a perfect example of this. In it, Parker turns her satirical eye on a particular type of person – those who try so hard to be helpful and kind that they end up being annoying instead. It's a character type that many readers would recognize, perhaps even in themselves. Through her writing, Parker challenged her readers to look beyond the surface of social niceties and consider the true nature of kindness and social interaction. Her work was both of its time – reflecting the changing social norms of the early 20th century – and timeless in its insights into human behavior.

## Keywords

Satire, Algonquin Round Table, Social commentary, Irony, 1920s American culture, Wit, Character study

## Discussion

### 3.4.1 Dorothy Parker

Dorothy Parker, born on 22 August 1893 in West End, New Jersey, was a prominent American writer, poet, and critic renowned for her sharp wit and acerbic commentary on society. Her career spanned several decades, during which she established herself as a formidable presence in American literature and popular culture. Parker's early life was marked by tragedy, with the loss of her mother at a young age and a difficult relationship with her father and stepmother. Despite these challenges, she developed a keen intellect and a passion for writing. Her education at Miss Dana's School in Morristown, New Jersey, and the Blessed Sacrament Convent School in New York City laid the foundation for her future literary career.

► Witty, prolific,  
tragic, influential

► Editorial staff &  
drama critic

In 1916, Parker stepped into her professional journey as a member of the editorial staff at *Vogue* magazine. This position served as a stepping stone to her role as a drama critic at *Vanity Fair* the following year. It was during this period that she married Edwin Pond Parker II in 1917, a union that would last

until 1928. Although their marriage ended in divorce, Parker retained her husband's surname throughout her professional life.



Fig.3.4.1 Dorothy Parker

### 3.4.1.1 The Algonquin Round Table

One of the most significant chapters in Parker's life was her involvement with the Algonquin Round Table. This informal literary group, which she helped establish in the 1920s, brought together some of the most brilliant minds of the era. The group, which included notable figures such as Robert Benchley, Robert E. Sherwood, and James Thurber, was known for its witty conversations and sharp critiques of contemporary culture. Parker's participation in the Algonquin Round Table cemented her reputation as one of New York's most brilliant conversationalists. Her quick wit and memorable quips became legendary and often attributed to her even when she wasn't their originator. This period saw Parker emerge as a symbol of the liberated woman of the 1920s, challenging societal norms with her intellect and humour.

► Founder of Algonquin

- ▶ Bestselling collections

- ▶ Story writer

- ▶ The story as a commentary

- ▶ Peculiar people

### 3.4.1.2 Literary Achievements and Style

Parker's literary output was diverse and prolific. Her first collection of poetry, *Enough Rope* (1926), became a bestseller, showcasing her talent for crafting light, witty, and occasionally cynical verse. This was followed by two more volumes of poetry, *Sunset Gun: Poems* (1928) and *Death and Taxes* (1931), which were later compiled with her first collection in *Collected Poems: Not So Deep As a Well* (1936).

In addition to poetry, Parker was an accomplished short story writer. Her story "Big Blonde" won the O. Henry Award for the best short story of 1929, demonstrating her ability to blend humour with poignant social commentary. Her short story collections, including *Laments for the Living* (1930) and *After Such Pleasures* (1933), further solidified her reputation as a masterful prose writer. Parker's writing style is characterised by its wit, irony, and often dark humour. She had a talent for exposing the foibles of human nature and society, often using her own experiences and observations as material for her work.

### 3.4.2 Context of "Good Souls"

"Good Souls" is a short story by Dorothy Parker that exemplifies her sardonic wit and keen observational skills. Originally published in *Vanity Fair* in June 1919, the story is a biting character study that showcases Parker's ability to dissect social behaviours and human nature with humour and insight. The story was written during a period of significant social change in America. The aftermath of World War I, the approaching end of the Progressive Era, and the dawn of the Roaring Twenties created a backdrop of shifting social norms and values. Parker's "Good Souls" can be seen as a commentary on the persistence of certain social types and behaviours amidst these changes.

### 3.4.3 Summary of "Good Souls"

The story is a satirical exploration of a particular type of person whom Parker dubs the "Good Soul". These individuals, according to Parker, are outwardly indistinguishable from regular people but are set apart by their excessive and often misguided attempts at kindness and helpfulness. The narrative begins with a description of Good Souls as "curious creatures" who, despite living among regular people, are forever isolated from them due to their peculiar nature. Parker writes: "Yet, between them and the rest of the civilized world, there stretches an impassable barrier. Though they live in the very thick of the

human race, they are forever isolated from it. They are fated to go through life, congenial pariahs.”

Parker then proceeds to outline the life cycle of a Good Soul, from childhood to adulthood. She describes how these individuals can be identified from a young age, often being the child who is consistently taken advantage of by their peers. As adults, Good Souls are characterised by their incessant need to help others, often in ways that are more annoying than useful. The author provides numerous examples of Good Soul behaviour, from their tendency to bring unwanted food to sick friends, to their insistence on giving up the best seats at the theatre. She writes: “When you are ill, who is it that hastens to your bedside bearing molds of blanc-mange, which, from infancy, you have hated with unspeakable loathing? As usual, you are way ahead of me, gentle reader—it is indeed the Good Soul.”

► Good soul's behaviour

Throughout the story, Parker maintains a tone of mock seriousness, treating the existence and behaviour of Good Souls as if they were a genuine sociological phenomenon. This approach allows her to deliver her critiques with maximum comic effect while also highlighting the genuine annoyance these well-meaning but misguided individuals can cause.

► Mockery

### 3.4.4 Analysis of “Good Souls”

#### 3.4.4.1 Satire and Social Commentary

At its core, “Good Souls” is a work of satire, using humour and irony to critique certain social behaviours and personality types. Parker’s portrayal of the Good Soul is exaggerated for comic effect, but it touches on real aspects of human behaviour that many readers would recognise. The story can be seen as a commentary on the sometimes suffocating nature of politeness and social niceties. The Good Souls, in their desperate attempts to be helpful and kind, often end up being intrusive and annoying. This reflects a broader social critique of the superficiality of certain social interactions and the potential negative effects of misguided unselfishness.

► Good souls as intrusive

#### 3.4.4.2 Characterisation and Stereotyping

Parker’s description of Good Souls is both detailed and broad, creating a vivid stereotype that encompasses a wide range of behaviours. She writes: “The Good soul begins early; he will show signs of his condition in extreme youth. Go now to the nearest window, and look out on the little

- ▶ On Good Soul's character

children playing so happily below. Any group of youngsters that you may happen to see will do perfectly. Do you observe the child whom all other little dears make “it” in their merry games?” This approach to characterisation allows Parker to create a recognisable “type” that readers can easily imagine and perhaps even identify in their own lives. However, it's important to note that this broad stereotyping is part of the story's satirical approach and should not be taken as a serious sociological observation.

Amusive tone

### 3.4.4.3 Narrative Voice and Tone

The narrative voice in “Good Souls” is crucial to its effectiveness as a piece of satire. Parker adopts a tone of mock seriousness, treating the existence and behaviour of Good Souls as if they were a genuine sociological phenomenon. This is evident in lines such as: “There is no accounting for Good Souls. They spring up anywhere. They will suddenly appear in families which, for generations have had no slightest stigma attached to them. Possibly they are throw-backs.” This pseudo-scientific approach to describing Good Souls adds to the humour of the piece while also mimicking the tone of serious social commentary. The effect is to both amuse the reader and encourage them to think critically about the behaviours being described.

- ▶ More harm than good

### 3.4.4.4 Irony and Paradox

A key element of Parker's critique in “Good Souls” is the irony inherent in the behaviour of these characters. Despite their name and their own self-perception, Good Souls often cause more harm than good. Parker highlights this paradox throughout the story, such as when she describes their behaviour towards sick friends: “It is they who efficiently smooth out your pillow when you have just worked it into the comfortable shape, who creak about the room on noisy tiptoe, who tenderly lay on your fevered brow damp cloths which drip ceaselessly down your neck.” This irony serves to underscore Parker's critique of misguided kindness and the potential negative effects of trying too hard to be “good”.

- ▶ 20th-century context

### 3.4.4.5 Cultural References and Period Details

“Good Souls” is peppered with cultural references and period details that root the story in its early 20th-century context. For example, Parker mentions specific authors and works that Good Souls enjoy: “In literature, they worship at the chaste shrines of Harold Bell Wright, Gene Stratton-Porter,

Eleanor Hallowell Abbott, Alice Hegan Rice, and the other triple-named apostles of optimism.” These references not only add authenticity to the portrayal but also serve as additional layers of satire, gently mocking the tastes and preferences of the type of person Parker is describing.

### 3.4.5 Themes in “Good Souls”

#### The Nature of Goodness

A central theme in “Good Souls” is the exploration of what it means to be “good”. Parker challenges the notion that good intentions always lead to good outcomes. The Good Souls in the story believe themselves to be kind and helpful, but their actions often result in annoyance or discomfort for others. This raises questions about the nature of true kindness and the potential pitfalls of trying too hard to be good.

- ▶ Helpful and annoying

#### Social Conformity and Individuality

The story also touches on themes of social conformity and individuality. The Good Souls are described as being outwardly indistinguishable from others yet fundamentally different in their behaviour. This tension between conformity and individuality is a recurring theme in Parker’s work and reflects broader social concerns of the early 20th century.

- ▶ Indistinguishable but different

#### The Role of Social Niceties

“Good Souls” can be read as a critique of excessive adherence to social niceties. The behaviours Parker describes - from insisting on giving up seats to sending constant greeting cards - are exaggerations of common social courtesies. By pushing these behaviours to their logical extreme, Parker encourages readers to question the role and value of such social conventions.

- ▶ Exaggerations

### 3.4.6 Critical Analysis

Dorothy Parker’s “Good Souls” is a masterclass in satirical writing, showcasing her unique ability to blend humour with social commentary. To fully appreciate the story, it’s worth examining Parker’s writing techniques in more detail. Parker frequently employs hyperbole to emphasise her points and add to the humorous effect. For instance, when describing the activities of Good Souls, she writes: “It is they who ask, every other minute if there isn’t something that they can do for you. It is they who, at a great personal sacrifice, spend long hours sitting beside your bed, reading aloud the continued stories

- ▶ Parker’s techniques

in the *Woman's Home Companion*, or chatting cosily on the increase in the city's death rate." The exaggeration in phrases like "every other minute" and the juxtaposition of "chatting cozily" with the morbid topic of death rates serves to heighten the absurdity of the Good Souls' behaviour.

► Distinctive rhythm

Parker's prose also has a distinctive rhythm that contributes to its memorability and impact. She often uses repetition and parallel structures to create this effect, as seen in the passage: "It is they who efficiently smooth out your pillow when you have just worked it into the comfortable shape, who creak about the room on noisy tiptoe, who tenderly lay on your fevered brow damp cloths which drip ceaselessly down your neck." The repeated use of "who" creates a rhythm that mimics the relentless nature of the Good Souls' attentions. Additionally, Parker frequently sets up ironic contrasts to highlight the disconnect between the Good Souls' intentions and the effects of their actions. This is evident in phrases like "creak about the room on noisy tiptoe," where the attempt at quietness paradoxically results in more noise.

► Historical and social context

To fully understand "Good Souls", it's important to consider the historical and social context in which it was written. The story was published in 1919, just after the end of World War I. This was a time of significant social change in America. The war had disrupted traditional social structures and roles, particularly for women who had taken on new responsibilities during the conflict. Parker's critique of excessive politeness and social niceties can be seen as a reflection of the changing attitudes towards traditional social behaviours in this post-war period. Parker herself was an embodiment of the 'New Woman' of the early 20th century - independent, career-focused, and challenging traditional gender roles. Her portrayal of the Good Souls, while not explicitly gendered, can be read as a critique of traditional expectations of feminine behaviour, particularly the expectation of self-sacrificing kindness. While not overtly discussed in "Good Souls", issues of class and social status are subtly present in the story. The behaviours Parker describes - such as sending postcards from trips or bringing gifts - are markers of a certain level of social and economic status. Her critique of these behaviours can be seen as a commentary on the performative aspects of middle-class respectability.

It's illuminating to consider "Good Souls" in the context of Parker's other works and those of her contemporaries. The story shares themes with many of Parker's other writings. For

► Comparison with other works

instance, her poem “The Lady’s Reward” similarly critiques societal expectations of feminine virtue: “Lady, lady, never start / Conversation toward your heart; / Keep your pretty words serene; / Never murmur what you mean.” Both works use irony to challenge social conventions, particularly those relating to women’s behaviour. Parker’s satirical approach in “Good Souls” can be compared to the work of other writers of the era, such as Ring Lardner or H.L. Mencken. Like Parker, these writers used humour to critique American society. However, Parker’s focus on the minutiae of social interactions and her distinctly feminine perspective set her work apart. Her sharp wit and observational humour have influenced generations of writers and comedians.

► Complexities of human behaviour

While “Good Souls” was written over a century ago, many of its observations remain relevant today. In the age of social media, Parker’s critique of performative kindness takes on new resonance. The behaviour of Good Souls can be seen as a precursor to modern phenomena like “virtue signalling” or oversharing on social platforms. “Good Souls” is more than just a humorous sketch; it’s a nuanced critique of social behaviour that continues to resonate with readers today. Through her masterful use of language, irony, and observational humour, Dorothy Parker created a timeless piece of social commentary. The story not only entertains but also encourages readers to think critically about social conventions and the nature of true kindness. As such, it remains a valuable text for understanding both its historical context and our contemporary social dynamics. Parker’s work, exemplified by “Good Souls”, continues to offer insight into the complexities of human behaviour and the often absurd nature of social interactions, making it as relevant and thought-provoking today as it was when it was first published.

## Summarised Overview

Dorothy Parker's "Good Souls," published in *Vanity Fair* in 1919, is a satirical short story that exemplifies her sharp wit and social commentary. The story focuses on a character type Parker calls "Good Souls" - people whose excessive attempts at kindness often result in annoyance rather than appreciation.

Set in early 20th-century America, the story reflects the changing social norms of the time while commenting on the persistence of certain behavioral types. Parker's writing style is characterized by irony, exaggeration, and dark humor. She employs a mock-serious tone, treating the existence of "Good Souls" as a genuine sociological phenomenon.

Key elements of the story include:

- ▶ Satirical portrayal of misguided kindness
- ▶ Vivid characterization of the "Good Soul" stereotype
- ▶ Exploration of themes such as the nature of goodness and social conformity
- ▶ Use of period-specific cultural references

Parker's observations in "Good Souls" remain relevant today, particularly in the context of performative kindness in the age of social media. The story encourages readers to think critically about social conventions and the nature of true kindness, showcasing Parker's ability to blend humor with insightful social critique.

## Assignments

1. How does Parker use satire in "Good Souls" to critique social behavior?
2. Analyse the narrative voice in "Good Souls" and its effect on the story's impact.
3. How does "Good Souls" reflect the social changes of early 20th-century America?
4. Compare Parker's portrayal of "Good Souls" with modern concepts of performative kindness.
5. Examine Parker's use of irony and paradox in "Good Souls."
6. How does "Good Souls" explore the tension between social conformity and individuality?

## Suggested Reading

1. Mark Van Doren. "Dorothy Parker." *The English Journal*, vol. 23, no. 7, 1934, pp. 535–43. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/804110>.
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## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU

# Fiction and Drama

## BLOCK-04

### Block Content

#### Unit 1 : Fiction

Kate Chopin: *The Awakening*

Lalithambika Antharjanam: *Agnisakshi (Fire, My Witness)*

#### Unit 2 : Short Story

Hisaye Yamamoto: “The Seventeen Syllables”

Mahasweta Devi: “The Divorce”

Katherine Mansfield: “A Doll’s House”

#### Unit 3 : Drama

Vinodini: *Thirst*

Caryl Churchill: *Top Girls*

# Unit 1

## Fiction

### Learning Outcomes

Upon the completion of the unit, the learners will be able to:

- ▶ critically analyse and interpret works by women writers in their social, cultural and historical context
- ▶ appreciate the diversity of women's experiences across genres, cultures and time periods
- ▶ understand and evaluate the intersectionality of gender with caste, class and race
- ▶ identify and discuss key themes prevalent in women's writing, such as identity, empowerment, and resistance

### Background

The evolution of women's writing mirrors the larger historical shifts in society and politics. The first instances of women's writing go back to ancient civilisations, where women expressed their thoughts and experiences through poetry and prose, although in limited contexts. For example, in India, the emergence of women's poetry can be traced back to the 6th century BCE. The *Therigatha*, recognised as one of the earliest collections of women's literature, consists of poems written by female Buddhist monks (*theris*). It not only documents the spiritual life of the nuns but also challenges gender roles and the societal expectations placed on women.

From the earliest recorded instances of female authorship, women have navigated a literary landscape dominated by male voices. Women's stories have had very little space in dominant discourse. However, authors like Jane Austen, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, the Bronte sisters and Virginia Woolf, among others, began to challenge societal norms and articulate women's experiences.

Disturbed by the realisation that women are under-represented and falsely portrayed in literature, feminist critics turned to women authors for alternate images of women. Elaine Showalter, in her *Towards a Feminist Poetics*, observes that the limited stereotypes

of women one sees in literature are the reflection of “what men have thought women should be” (129). Showalter developed a theory of women’s writing and coined the term gynocriticism. Gynocriticism focuses on women as writers. Helen Cixous urges women to write themselves out of the world which has been created for them by men and proposes the concept of *Ecriture Feminine* (322). *Ecriture feminine* has now come to denote a type of writing that is totally different from male language and discourse in subject matter, feeling, style, language and tone. A branch of feminist literary theory, *écriture feminine*, facilitated the creation of a literature which repudiates/rejects the patriarchal prescriptions of women and welcomes women’s voices on women.

The woman writer now engaged with “deconstructing and reconstructing” those images of women brought over from male writing, especially the classic depiction of women as angels or monsters (Gilbert and Gubar 176). Powerful independent women characters began to emerge in literature. Many women writers questioned and challenged the stereotypical female characters by recreating them in new incarnations. In the course of time women’s writing established itself as an independent discipline.

## Keywords

Women and Literature, Patriarchal Discourse and Stereotypical Female Characters, *Ecriture Feminine*, Gynocriticism

## Discussion

### 4.1.1 Novel - I : *The Awakening*

#### 4.1.1.1 Kate Chopin (1851-1904)

Kate Chopin (born Katherine O’Flaherty) is a distinguished American author renowned for her insightful examination and exploration of women’s lives and experiences. Chopin’s literary career commenced when she was 36 years old. Chopin wrote nearly a hundred short stories, most of which were published in prestigious national magazines like *Vogue* and *Harper’s Monthly*. *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897) contain some of Chopin’s best-known short stories. Her first novel *At Fault*, had difficulty finding a publisher. Chopin’s second novel and her most acclaimed work, *The Awakening* (1899) was disapproved in her own times for its sexual frankness and the unconventional behaviour of its protagonist.

► Early life and works

- ▶ Intricate female characters

Chopin's writing is distinguished by its local colour style (a style of writing based on the depiction and distinct characteristics and peculiarities of a place and its people), which vividly portrays the distinct Creole and Cajun cultures of Louisiana, a region where she resided for a substantial period of time. Her works frequently showcase intricate female protagonists who navigate the challenges of societal norms and personal aspirations, embodying her conviction in the power and uniqueness of women. Chopin's work is acknowledged as a precursor to feminist literature due to her defiance of the prevailing societal norms of her era. She portrayed women as complex individuals with distinct identities and ambitions.

- ▶ Transformation of the protagonist

#### 4.1.1.2 *The Awakening*

*The Awakening* revolves around the life of young Edna Pontellier, a wife and mother who experiences a significant personal transformation as the novel unfolds. The story is set in New Orleans and the Louisiana Gulf coast during the late 19th century. It portrays Edna's challenge of reconciling her increasing yearning for independence and self-fulfilment with the restrictive societal norms imposed on women during that era.

- ▶ Holiday & emotional awakening

The novel opens in Grand Isle, a summer retreat situated on an island off the coast of Louisiana. Edna, her husband Léonce and their two children are enjoying their holiday in Grand Isle alongside other affluent Creole families. Edna, who usually maintains an emotional distance from her husband, starts to spend time with a charming young man named Robert Lebrun. As Edna's relationship with Robert deepens, she becomes increasingly aware of her own emotions and aspirations. She realises that she is unsatisfied with her role solely as a wife and a mother.

- ▶ Art & self-fulfillment

Edna befriends two very different women - Madame Ratignolle, who epitomises maternal morality, and Mademoiselle Reisz, an unmarried pianist who embodies the life of a self-reliant female artist. Edna commences art lessons and engages in painting. She diligently focuses on painting while neglecting her familial and social obligations.

- ▶ Self-discovery & self-awakening

Edna's moments of self-discovery are intricately linked to the ocean, which functions as a potent metaphor for liberation and possibility. At a significant juncture, Edna acquires the swimming skill, symbolising her increasing independence and ability to govern her own life. Upon Robert's sudden departure

from Grand Isle, Edna succumbs to a state of melancholy. Nevertheless, the seeds of awakening have been planted in her.

- ▶ Edna and her romantic affair

Edna's growing sense of self and bodily autonomy, compel her to make audacious choices. She relocates from the family residence to a more modest dwelling, referred to as a "pigeon house", with the intention of asserting her independence from her husband. Edna also initiates a romantic relationship with a charismatic young man named Alcée Arobin, but she does not have any genuine emotional connection to him.

- ▶ Edna's self-awakening and choices

Edna learns that Robert has come back to New Orleans. Their reunion is characterised by tension, as Robert maintains a physical and emotional distance while Edna is completely absorbed by her profound affection for him. She persists in oscillating between delight and grief, uncertain of Robert's genuine emotions. Robert leaves for Mexico. Although he harbours genuine feelings for Edna, Robert recognises that pursuing a serious relationship with her would breach the conventions of their society, particularly since she is a married woman. Thus, he chooses to leave rather than risk the consequences of his affections. This ultimately reinforces Edna's sense of isolation and her awakening to the constraints placed upon her by society.

- ▶ Edna's self-determination

Edna's quest for self-realisation takes a significant toll on her personal well-being. She has isolated herself from her husband and children and lacks a genuine support network to maintain her new-found autonomy. Edna ventures into the water, potentially intending to terminate her own life. She cannot find harmony between her aspirations and the harsh truths of her circumstances. Her demise can be interpreted as an expression of self-determination, as she assumes authority over her own existence and physical being in the sole manner available to her. The conclusion of the novel is both enigmatic and sorrowful.

- ▶ Edna Pontellier

#### 4.1.1.3 Major Characters

**Edna Pontellier:** Edna Pontellier is a twenty-eight-year-old woman who epitomises the struggle between societal conventions and individual aspirations. Initially portrayed as an obedient spouse and mother, Edna experiences a significant transformation during her summer holiday at Grand Isle. This holiday at Grand Isle and the people she meets there stimulate her to realise her artistic and sexual aspirations. Edna confronts the limitations imposed by her marriage to Léonce

Pontellier and her responsibilities as a mother. Through her romantic relationships with Robert Lebrun and subsequently with Alcée Arobin, Edna endeavours to express her autonomy and reconstruct her identity outside the conventional roles of spouse and parent.

Edna continues to undergo internal conflict: she fluctuates between instances of empowerment and self-interest. Although she audaciously challenges societal norms, her acts frequently result in solitude and despondency. Edna's sad demise—her drowning in the sea—functions as both a rebellion against societal limits and a searing critique of the limitations imposed on women's liberty.

**Léonce Pontellier:** Léonce Pontellier, is a successful businessman who prioritises material wealth. He looks at everything, including his wife and children, as his possessions and places very little value on emotional connection. He represents the patriarchal values. His obliviousness to Edna's dissatisfaction underscores his role as a symbol of conventional masculinity. Léonce's attempts to control Edna's behaviour reveal his inability to understand her need for independence. His character contrasts Edna's burgeoning self-awareness with the societal expectations that confine women to domestic roles.

▶ Léonce Pontellier

**Robert Lebrun:** Robert Lebrun is pivotal in Edna's awakening. His flirtation with Edna ignites her suppressed desires and prompts her emotional exploration. However, his eventual departure to Mexico signifies the limitations of their relationship; he embodies both desire and unattainability. Robert's character illustrates the complexities of love and longing within the confines of societal norms, ultimately leading Edna to confront the reality that true freedom may be unattainable within her social context.

▶ Robert Lebrun

**Mademoiselle Reisz:** Mademoiselle Reisz is a devoted pianist, who serves as a mentor figure to Edna. Her independence and artistic lifestyle deeply influence Edna. Through their interactions, Mademoiselle Reisz encourages Edna to embrace her individuality and pursue her passions. However, Reisz also represents the loneliness that can accompany such independence, highlighting the sacrifices women make in their quest for self-actualisation.

▶ Mademoiselle Reisz

**Adèle Ratignolle:** Adèle Ratignolle, a dedicated mother and wife, epitomises the ideal 19th-century woman. Her contentment in fulfilling societal expectations serves as a sharp contrast to Edna's rejection of familial and societal obligations.

▶ Adèle Ratignolle

#### 4.1.1.4 Major Themes

##### 1) *Freedom and Self-autonomy and Personal Possession*

A prominent motif of the novel is the idea of liberty, namely the pursuit of individual autonomy. Edna's journey commences with her realisation of her own aspirations and requirements, which are frequently repressed by societal conventions. On Grand Isle, she discovers a new feeling of freedom. Her encounters with Robert Lebrun and Mademoiselle Reisz motivate her to regain her sense of self. Edna ultimately refuses the idea of being a mere possession of her husband, asserting her entitlement to determine her own course in life.

##### 2) *Desire and Sexual Awakening*

Desire is another prominent theme as Edna explores her sexuality and artistic ambitions. Her relationships with Robert and Alcée Arobin serve as catalysts for her sexual awakening, allowing her to experience passion outside the confines of her marriage. This exploration of desire not only signifies her quest for personal fulfilment but also challenges the traditional views on female sexuality during the era. Edna's journey reflects a broader commentary on women's rights and the importance of embracing one's own desires.

##### 3) *Motherhood and Individuality*

The novel presents contrasting ideas of motherhood, unlike the general idealised conceptions of maternal selflessness. Edna perceives motherhood as a type of confinement. Adèle Ratignolle represents the archetype of the "mother-woman", but Edna views her children as limitations to her own liberty. This contrast highlights the conflict between the expectations imposed by society and the personal aspirations of an individual. Edna faces the challenge of fulfilling her duties as a mother while also striving to discover her own sense of self.

##### 4) *Isolation and Alienation*

Isolation plays a crucial role in Edna's awakening. As she seeks independence, she increasingly faces alienation from her family and society. Her journey reveals the loneliness that often accompanies the pursuit of personal freedom as her relationships become strained, and she ultimately finds herself isolated in her quest for self-discovery. This theme underscores the emotional cost of defying societal norms and highlights the challenges faced by women who seek to assert their individuality.

#### 4.1.1.5 Language

Chopin's language in *The Awakening* combines naturalism with realism. The narrative uses a third-person omniscient perspective that frequently corresponds with the protagonist, Edna Pontellier. Chopin's writing combines aspects of dialect, specifically French, which portrays the Creole culture of Louisiana and enhances the authenticity of the relationship of her characters. The utilisation of local colour in the story not only places it within a distinct cultural framework but also emphasises the concepts of identity and independence that are prevalent throughout the novel.

- ▶ Natural and realistic

#### 4.1.1.6 Reception

*The Awakening* generated much controversy because of its frank examination of female sexuality and its criticism of conventional gender norms. The work did not undergo legal prohibition but encountered substantial censorship and received strong negative reactions from contemporary audiences. Chopin's third collection of short stories was rejected by the publishers because of the unfavourable reviews *The Awakening* received. Chopin essentially stopped to write after this. The women's movement of the 1960s added impetus to the revival of the novel.

- ▶ Encountered censorship

### 4.1.2 Novel - II *Agnisakshi: Fire, My Witness*

#### 4.1.2.1 Lalithambika Antharjanam (1909-1987)

Lalithambika Antharjanam began her career as a poet and a writer of short stories. *Agnisakshi (Fire, my Witness)* published in 1976 is Antharjanam's only novel. In the appendix to *Agnisakshi*, Lalithambika Antharjanam confessed that she is not very conversant with the form of the novel (Antharjanam 105). Her chosen form of creative expression was the short story in which she excelled and made a name for herself.

- ▶ Lalithambika Antharjanam and the novel

Lalithambika Antharjanam was born in Kerala on the 30<sup>th</sup> of March 1909 in the Kottavatath Illam as the only daughter among nine children. Her father, Kottavatath Damodaran Potty, was a poet, and her mother, Nangayya Antharjanam, was a housewife. Born in a traditional orthodox Namboodiri family, the young Lalithambika led a very sheltered life within the confines of her ancestral home. Her parents made every effort to give her books to read and opportunities to discuss whatever

- ▶ Life and influences

she read with them. As a result of this, she began to write, and her works constantly showed a passionate involvement with progressive ideas that were beyond comprehension for other women of her time. Antharjanam was deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and his teachings.

► Awards and recognition

*Agnisakshi* brought Lalithambika Antharjanam instant acclaim and prestigious awards, including the first Vayalar award, the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award, the Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award and the Odakuzhal Award. *Agnisakshi* has been made into a film with the same title by Shyamaprasad.

#### 4.1.2.2 *Agnisakshi (Fire, My Witness)*

► Devaki's loneliness

The novel *Agnisakshi* was translated into English by Vasanthi Sankara Narayanan in 1980 with the title *Fire, My Witness*. A major portion of the novel is seen through the eyes of Thankam or Mrs. Nair, the sister-in-law of the protagonist, Devaki. The novel is a journey down Thankam's memory lane. Thethi, the young bride who is brought to the Manambally Illam, becomes Devaki Manambally and then Devi Behen, and finally the ascetic Sumitrananda. Devaki, brought up in an educated and progressive Namboodiri home, feels stifled in the cloistered life at her husband's house. Unni, her husband, though earnest in his effort to keep her happy, is entangled in the bonds of tradition and is unable to fulfil his duties as a husband. Devaki is out of her depth in her new environment. In her parental home she used to have intelligent debates with her brother on issues of social and national importance. When her brother was not around, she had her books for company. But in the traditional and conservative home of her husband, she has no friends, no companions except Thankam, Unni's half-sister.

► Response to societal changes

Duties and the age-old customs and rituals of the family and the community keep her husband fully engaged that he has no time for her. Meanwhile, dramatic social changes take place beyond the walls of the *illam*. Both Unni and Devaki realise it. Unni takes refuge in tradition and shuts himself away from society since he knows his family is averse to the new ideas slowly making their way into Namboodiri households. A frustrated and disappointed Devaki is forced to leave the house to participate in the progressive, reformist movement. She joins the Indian national struggle for independence. Later she experiences a vacuum in her life and goes off again, this time to live the life of a *sanyasini*.

► Devaki's transformation

The years roll on. Gandhiji is assassinated. Communal violence breaks out in many parts of the country. From among the freedom fighters, those hungry for power grab opportunities and become ministers. Liquour flows through the land. Undeterred, Devi Behen continues to work for the national cause, working among those affected by the riots and also for the cause of women. The unhappy incident of the Pakistani refugee girl (whom Devi Behen names Thankam and who serves as her constant companion) giving birth to an illegitimate child and later strangling it herself upsets Devi Behen. So shaken is she that she renounces the world and takes up life as the ascetic Sumitrananda. She seeks spiritual freedom. Sumitrananda performs severe penances. For a long, she led the life of a virtual recluse, meeting no one, talking to no one and always engaged in meditating upon God. She cuts off all attachments and associations with the world, seeking spiritual solace in God. But then she meets a *swamiji* who advises her to drop the hatred on the world and asks her to love and embrace those many women who were less fortunate than she was. The *swamiji*'s words once again link Sumitrananda to the world. The *swamiji* teaches her that no one can attain God by detaching himself/herself from the world. Only by loving life around one can one be united with God. Sumitrananda sets up an ashram on the banks of the Ganga and lives a life of meditation and prayer. However, memories of her past worldly life haunt her. She finds she is unable to forget her husband whom she had forsaken long ago. Even as a *sanyasin*, she still practises the 'fire ritual', the custom prevalent among the Namboodiri community of offering a small portion of a meal to the fire before partaking of it. When questioned by a devotee who visits her why she wastes food this way, Sumaitrananda's reply is that she believed that "fire is the symbol of hunger" as it consumes everything and that she was satisfying the hunger of the universe through her offerings (Antharjanam 94). Yet her soul whispers to her that she did this for someone whom, she felt "she should serve and feed" (Antharjanam 95). Despite her radical views, Sumitrananda still clings fast to certain superstitions that refuse to loosen their hold on her. Even fate conspires against Sumitrananda in bringing to her presence Thankam, who, in her thoughts, had struggled to keep down.

► Valuing promises and bonds

Thankam hands over to Sumitrananda, Devaki's wedding pendant, which Unni had entrusted with Thankam. Sumitrananda gifts it to Thankam's granddaughter (named Devaki in honour of a promise Thankam had once made to Tethi) and asks her to cherish the purity of the pendant.

### 4.1.2.3 Major Characters

#### *Devaki Manambally*

► The protagonist

Devaki Manambally, the protagonist of *Agnisakshi*, is the embodiment of beauty, virtue and intelligence. She was brought up in a liberal household whose members were actively involved in the nationalist movement. Manambally Illam, which she is married into, is a conventional Namboodiri family. Tethi, as Devaki is known, finds life in her husband Unni's house stifling. She follows the customs and traditions of Manambally Illam but is unhappy. Burning with revolutionary thoughts, she longs for a change. In those days, the women of Namboodiri families lived a life confined to the four walls of the house. It was a highly patriarchal society where women, though not subjected to much physical torture, were under mental and emotional stress. Devaki is brought up differently. Back in her own home, she was taught to think for herself. The person behind this is her elder brother, who later becomes a social reformist. Her debates with her brother and the socio-political books which she reads—a practice unheard of among Namboodiri women who were only familiar with the scriptures—expose her to the conditions prevailing in her country at the time. Her brother, P.K.P. Namboodiri, detested the social and religious injustices in society and constantly fought for the rights of the women of his community. His character is summed up in Devaki's words about him: "My brother always says a man who is useless in this world will be the same in the next" (*Antarjanam* 21). So it is no surprise that Devaki has evolved thus.

At Manambally Illam, Tethi desires her husband's love and affection and is disappointed that he finds little time for her as he is busy with the rituals and prayers for the family and with affairs concerning the family property. Tethi's conjugal life is monitored by Unni's mother and he is allowed to spend time with her only on auspicious days. Devaki's words, "He[Unni] loves nobody. Fears everything and everyone! Aphan... his mother...customs...even God. As my brother says, if I live here, I too may go mad with fear" give the reader a picture of her condition(23). It would be no exaggeration to say that if Unni had shown more affection towards his wife, the course of Devaki's life would have been different. Even though she could not find what she had wished for from a husband in Unni, Devaki never detests him. In one of her letters to her brother, she says about her husband, "He is a God, O' brother He will

► Devaki's character

never understand me. You taught me about humans and then why did you marry me off to a God? ”(32) The unintentional indifference of her husband, the mental harassment she suffers at the hands of others, the tiring customs of the illam, and the numbing solitude take its toll on Devaki. But somehow, it strengthens her will and intensifies her urge for social reformation. Within the four walls of the illam, she feels like a caged bird. Thankam, Devaki's faithful companion, could read Devaki's mind with relative clarity. She sees the spark of revolution in Devaki's eyes- a spark that kindles into a blazing fire later and prompts her to leave her husband and her home, and its customs behind her to tread a new path. Devaki's brother is arrested for his nationalist activities. Devaki is forbidden from visiting her family anymore. Her mother falls ill and sends for Devaki. Devaki is told that if she chose to visit her mother she would not be permitted to return to her husband's house. Devaki, however, pays her mother a visit and is prohibited from returning to Manambally Illam. Aphan later relents and permits Devaki to return, provided she performs certain rites of repentance. Devaki nevertheless chooses not to go back. She refuses to be the typical antharjanam with her “umbrella and bowed head” (Antharjanam 62).

► Devaki as social worker

She plunges deep into the nationalist movement. Devaki grows beyond the bounds of caste and community. In a short while, Devi Behen emerges as a prominent figure in the freedom movement. Devi Behen is held in high esteem by Gandhiji and Nehru. India was then still under British domination. Devaki believed that if women of the Namboodiri caste were to be freed of the shackles of conventions and superstitions, the nation must attain political freedom. It is this conviction which prompts her to join the freedom struggle. Devaki takes active participation in the movement. At a public gathering, she addresses the crowd: “I do not represent any particular caste, community or religion. I am the voice of women who have endured centuries of oppression. You can bless or curse this woman who stands unveiled before you. But remember that this burden of sorrow we bear is your creation(Antharjanam 51). Devaki later becomes a dedicated social worker fighting for the cause of women. However, she becomes disillusioned by the turn of events after India becomes independent. Many of the Gandhian supporters abandon their ideals in pursuit of material pleasures, wealth and authority. Grieved at this, Devi Behen gives up worldly life to become an ascetic.

- ▶ Renouncing worldly life

The central female character Devaki Manambally later Devi Behen renounces worldly life and assumes the name Sumitrananda. Devaki, who had done selfless service for others, found renunciation a solace from memories. She spends her days in prayer in her ashram on the banks of the holy river Ganga. Her meeting with Thankam after several years, however, disturbs her. All the memories that she had locked safely in the dark recesses of her mind come flooding into her consciousness.

### *Thankam*

- ▶ Educational persuasion

A major part of the novel is narrated from the point of view of Thankam or Mrs Nair. Most of the time, it is her perspective which helps the readers to know the characters closely. Thankam is the half-sister of Unni Namboodiri, the male protagonist. The only daughter of her parents, she was brought up with much love and care. Much of her whims and fancies are fulfilled by her parents. Yet, as the daughter of a Brahmin father and Nair mother, she has to suffer the restrictions imposed on her by the rigid caste system prevalent in those days. She is not allowed to even touch her own father; Netyamma, her mother, constantly reminds her, “Daughter, don’t touch your father and pollute him. He can’t have a bath often because of his rheumatism”(Antarjanam 18) . Women of the Nair community were not permitted to go beyond the confines of their homes. Aphan Namboodiri changes this rule for the sake of his wife and child. “Those were the days when Nair women never left their maternal homes. But when Aphan Namboodiri renovated the granary alongside his house and brought his wife to live there, no one protested” (Antharjanam 17). Netyamma, Aphan’s Nair wife, is a progressive woman who is aware of the value of education. She, therefore, insists that her daughter is sent to school and later to the university. “Thus, because of mother’s persuasions, I went to school, read books and acquired the power to think” (24). From a very young age, Thankam has a clear view of the importance of education and its power to deliver an individual from ignorance. Realising that education could bring her considerable independence, she always desired to acquire a high level of education and win a respectable position in society- something unimaginable in those times. “... should study. Get good grades. Study further. Do graduation, post-graduation then secure a good job and be economically independent...” (35) Thankam muses. She believes that women should support themselves.

- Restrictions due to family life

When Thankam attains marriageable age, her parents wish to get her married off. However, Thankam is determined to study further. Her mother wants her to marry a rich Namboodiri and lead a comfortable life. But Thankam does not quite like the idea of improving the conditions in her life by marrying into an affluent family. She does not want the alms offered by a rich husband. Instead, she wishes to take up a career, be economically independent and thus improve her prospects. "Thankam never believed in fate. She believed in hard work... . She saw life as a struggle." (36). Though Thankam is triumphant in many of her battles against conventions, there are occasions when she is unsuccessful. The constraints of orthodoxy deny her the chance to have a last glimpse of her father after his death. Stricken with grief, she and her mother passively accept the rules of the community. They are forced to leave the house her father had set up for them with just memories to take along with them. The ties that link her to her father's family are snapped, a connection which for many years remains broken for Aphan's family always resented the fact that he had squandered much of the family wealth on Thankam and her mother. Thankam becomes a self-reliant woman. Luck did favour her in that she had loving parents who stood by her and supported her in her aspirations, but it was her own determination that helped her move ahead in life.

### *Unni*

Devaki's husband and the leading male character, Unni, gives up the best things in his life for some futile beliefs. He lives a life of abnegation. Unni is so bound to his own family that he fails to keep intact the tie between husband and wife. He is always so busy fulfilling his duties as a son that he forgets his responsibilities as a husband. Lost in the world of scriptures and philosophy and performing the rituals expected of him for the spiritual well-being of the family, he has little time for his intelligent and progressive wife, and she leaves him in the course of his life. He is so firmly planted in tradition that it is impossible to uproot him from that. He is wholly unselfish and cares only for the feelings and emotions of others. On one occasion, he tells the fifteen-year-old Thankam "But it is not our likes alone that matter. We have to consider the wishes of others." (Antharjanam 24 ) Unni's love for Devaki is unconditional. It is deep and boundless. So much so that he never expects anything from her in return. He always knew that she, too, loved him with the same intensity. The husband and wife understand each other yet can never accept each

- Unni's spiritual bond with Devaki

other. When Devaki leaves him, all his relatives persuade Unni to marry another girl to whom he has an heir. Unni refuses. He tells Thankam, “Maybe Thethi can have a life without me. But I have no life without her. Manamballi Unni may be old fashioned, foolish, an oaf. But he is not cruel enough to abandon the woman he married with fire as witness. ... He knows to keep waiting forever for those who love him”(49). Devaki may have left him physically. But Unni always feels her presence with him. His relationship with his wife is one on the spiritual level. He tells Thankam “No one individual can abandon the other. Can man sever those whom God has united? ... To one born to a Brahmin clan life is an ordeal. More than his own will it is that of others which prevails over him.”(48) In the evening of his life Unni comes to the awareness that he had fritted away his life in rituals and beliefs. He tells Thankam: “...my days are over. I am one who threw away the fortunes of my life for certain meaningless beliefs. But I gained something else instead, the power to love the universe through God. Today I realise man and God are the same. All that I had lost I have gained through this”(Antarjanam 79). Thankam thought highly of her brother, one as constant as the pole star, and felt that Devaki had never understood him and that nobody ever did. In the depiction of the character of Unni Namboodiri *Antarjanam* succeeds fairly well. Unni Namboodiri’s image remains larger than life in the minds of the two leading women characters in the novel as well as in the minds of the readers. His love for his sister, his respect and regard for his autocratic uncle and for the traditional rituals and customs of the Namboodiri household are vividly drawn.

### *P.K.P. Namboodiri*

Devaki’s brother, P.K.P. Namboodiri, is a revolutionary who wishes to effect radical changes in society. He was an excellent writer and an eloquent speaker. A fearless revolutionary he believed “The antharjanams do not need their palm-leaf umbrellas he would articulate. Nor the Namboodiris their sacred thread. We do not want untouchability. The rule of the emperor should be ended”( *Antarjanam* 29). Everyone in Madambally Illam expressed regret that Unni had married the sister of such a man. Post-independence days find P.K.P Namboodiri offering services as a priest in a temple. He approaches Mrs Nair with a request to her to help his son, who had just completed his schooling, find a job. Mrs Nair’s suggestion that P.K.P. Namboodiri apply for a freedom fighter’s pension offends him. He almost explodes, saying that he had not come as a beggar.

► The revolution-ary character

He elaborates that he found dignity in labour and would feel ashamed only in “earning money through selling ideals”(80).

### *Aniyan*

Aniyan, Unni’s brother, is a social revolutionary in the initial parts of the novel. He is a member of the Yogakshema Sabhha, a movement started among the Namboodiris’ with the intention of effecting social reform among them. Aniyan cut off his tuft of hair, the symbol of his caste and mingled with people of all castes. However, his idealism soon wanes, and he goes after fame and material comforts. He marries a very wealthy girl with a very modern outlook. He asks Thankam if she could get her husband to manage a *tamrapatra* for him for services rendered during the freedom struggle as it can boost his political aspirations.

► The shift in Aniyan’s life

### *Bhranthicherryamma*

She was once a beautiful young girl married off to a man much older than her. Her husband assaults her physically and mentally. All this drives her to insanity.

### *Aphan*

The patriarch of the Manambally *illam* who steadfastly holds on to oppressive and hegemonic religious and cultural practices.

## 4.1.2.4 Major Themes

### 1) *Patriarchy and Oppression of Women*

*Agnisakshi* illustrates the oppressive nature of patriarchy as experienced by Namboodiri women in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Kerala. It explores the systemic oppression of women, as societal norms and cultural practices impose rigid constraints that restrict female autonomy. Women are portrayed as victims of a hierarchical power structure that favours men, consigning women to positions of subservience and acquiescence. The characters, especially Tethikutty and Thankam, represent the struggle against repressive forces as they navigate their identities under a stringent patriarchal structure that governs their actions and constrains their autonomy. The story analyses societal factors that sustain gender inequality and underscores the effect of internalised oppression on women’s mental health and self-image.

## **2) Female Solidarity**

Another important theme in *Agnisakshi* is the exploration of female solidarity and the importance of relationships among women. The relationship between Thethikutty and Thankam Nair highlights the importance of women's solidarity in their pursuit of freedom from societal limitations. Their relationship epitomises a mutual struggle against oppression, indicating that shared experiences can cultivate resilience and empowerment. This subject is further emphasised by the novel's depiction of maternity, in which Lalithambika reconceptualises maternal function beyond the boundaries of the home and positions it as essential to public life and societal reform. The meeting of Thethikutty and Thankam at the conclusion indicates a positive vision of togetherness and shared purpose among women, underlining the idea that their hardships are intertwined.

## **3) Detachment and Renunciation**

*Agnisakshi* discusses the themes of detachment and renunciation through the lives of its main characters, particularly Thethikutty, Thankam and Unni Nambudiri. Detachment in this context is not merely a physical separation from societal norms but an inner transformation that allows characters to transcend their attachments to worldly desires and expectations. The narrative critiques all hegemonic structures that bind individuals, emphasising that true renunciation involves recognising the divine essence within all aspects of life, thus fostering a sense of peace and spiritual awakening. Through this exploration, the novel advocates a deeper understanding of love and devotion that stems from a place of inner freedom rather than out of obligation or societal pressure.

## **4) Symbol of Fire**

Fire is a central motif in both its literal and symbolic meanings. The title *Agnisakshi* translates to "With Fire, As Witness," emphasising the significance of fire as a witness to the events and transformations in the lives of the main characters. On a literal level, the story is set against the backdrop of the Indian independence movement, with the lives of the characters intertwined with the fervent cries for freedom. The "fire" of this struggle serves as a catalyst for the protagonists' journey to emancipate from societal constraints.

#### 4.1.2.5 Critical Analysis

*Agnisakshi* offers a vehement critique of the patriarchal systems that oppress women, especially within the Namboodiri society. The story elucidates the social, cultural, and religious systems that impose ‘discipline’ and ‘order’ on women’s conduct, eventually resulting in their subjugation. The protagonist, Thethikutty, represents the struggle between personal aspirations and cultural constraints. Antaranjanam’s firsthand knowledge of the conflicts and problems that the Namboodiri families had to deal with at this period in history gives the narrative its wealth of descriptive detail about the community. As a person who lived within the restrictions imposed by her society and still managed to give the rebellious feelings she nursed against them powerful expression, she could project the experiences of her characters as sharply as if they were her own as well as view them from outside as an observer and storyteller.

- ▶ Critique of the patriarchal systems

The tyranny of family relationships, opposition from orthodox members of the community, a constant fear of being cast out of society and a cowardly reluctance to break with long-established customs are dealt with by Lalithambika Antharjanam in *Agnisakshi*. Set in the backdrop of the Indian freedom struggle, the novel also deals with the major characters’ quest for peace. Thethikutty seeks multiple paths to attain inner peace and liberation. However, this quest does not lead to immediate fulfilment. Instead, it reveals to her the complexities of her identity and desires. Thethikutty’s struggle illustrates that true peace is not merely the absence of conflict but rather a profound understanding and acceptance of oneself amidst external chaos. Unni grapples with the conflict between his orthodox upbringing and his personal sense of right and wrong. He abandons all material possessions, leads a life of piety and seeks peace in God.

- ▶ Conflict and tyranny

One gets glimpses of the nationalist movement that swept throughout India and the part played by Gandhiji and his non-violent drive through the story of Devaki, her brother P.K.P. Namboodiri and also Unni’s brother. India attains political independence. Unfortunately, those who sacrificed a lot and took part in the freedom struggle are disheartened. Many like Kalyanidevi, the old lady who taught Mrs Nair’s son and whom the students called ‘Paglima’, are heartbroken and depressed at the plight of free India. Kalyanidevi’s soliloquy “My India. My own country. The Rama Rajya won through

- ▶ Context of freedom struggle

so much sacrifice. Thinking of its fate saddens me... Today's India is the symbol of all that we had denied ourselves" expresses the opinion of all who had worked for the attainment of independence (Antarjanam71). Kalyanidevi's story of the dissolute daughter of a patriot who had given his life for his country is indeed disheartening. India had freed herself from British domination only to sink into the mire of materialism and corruption. The passion and idealism of the days of the freedom movement give way to distortion of the aims of Gandhiji and his followers. Essential items are hoarded by corrupt dealers and are unavailable in the market. Small-time political leaders completely deform Gandhian ideals in post-independent India.

A remarkable aspect of Antharjanam's book is the language she uses. She almost invites a new kind of narration, which is filled with unconventional monosyllabic or disyllabic sentences. Antharjanam plays upon words and often employs the method of repetition of words with the same meaning. The author evokes visual images not only through descriptions but also through the sounds of the words, which come out in the form of chants. The spontaneity and the ease with which she creates these word pictures give the book the quality of a film.

► Unconventional narration

## Summarised Overview

*The Awakening* by Kate Chopin follows Edna Pontellier, a young mother in the late 19th century, as she embarks on a journey of self-discovery and sexual awakening, challenging the constraints of her marriage and societal expectations. As Edna seeks independence, she grapples with her desires and the oppressive nature of her domestic life, leading her to form relationships that defy conventional norms. Ultimately, her quest for autonomy culminates in tragedy, highlighting the harsh realities faced by women who dared to assert their individuality in a patriarchal society.

*Agnisakshi* narrates the story of one woman's quest for independence and criticises society's mistreatment of women. It explores gender dynamics in a changing socio-political landscape. Its ageless themes of freedom and liberation resonate with current discussions on women's rights and emancipation.

## Assignments

1. Analyse the symbolism and imagery of the sea in *The Awakening*. How does the ocean represent freedom, escape and self-discovery for Edna?
2. Discuss the evolution of Edna's character and the factors responsible for its transformation.
3. Analyse the treatment of gender roles and societal expectations in *The Awakening*. How do the constraints of late 19th-century society limit the choices available to women like Edna, and how does she challenge these norms?
4. Explore the theme of motherhood and its impact on Edna's identity. How does her role as a mother, particularly in contrast to her friend Adele Ratignolle, influence her choices and self-perception? Discuss the paradox of Edna's refusal to sacrifice for her children yet taking her own life.
5. Analyse the ending of the novel and the various interpretations of Edna's fate. Do you believe her actions at the end of the story represent a triumph of self-discovery or a tragic outcome? Explore the ambiguity of the ending and how it relates to the overall meaning of the novel.
6. Discuss the role of tradition and modernity in the novel *Agnisakshi*. How do the main characters navigate these conflicting forces throughout the novel?
7. Analyse the character of Unni Namboodiri. How does his orthodox upbringing influence his relationship with Thethikutty, and what does this reveal about societal expectations of men in early 20th-century Kerala?
8. Examine the theme of female rebellion in *Agnisakshi*. How do Thethikutty and Thankam Nair represent different facets of resistance against patriarchal norms?
9. Consider the narrative style of the novel *Agnisakshi*. How does Antharjanam's storytelling technique enhance the themes of choice, detachment and love within the novel?
10. Critically reflect on the ending of the novel *Agnisakshi*. What message does it convey about the possibility of reconciliation between personal desires and societal obligations?

## Suggested Reading

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## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU

## Unit 2

# Short Story

### Learning Outcomes

Upon the completion of the unit, the learners will be able to:

- ▶ critically analyse the historical and social contexts that influenced the development of the genre of the short story genre by women writers from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day
- ▶ examine the unique stylistic and thematic elements that characterise the short stories of prominent women writers
- ▶ investigate the ways in which women writers have used the short story to explore issues of gender, identity and social justice
- ▶ assess the impact of the work on feminist literary criticism and theory.

### Background

Women have played a crucial role in shaping the short story by imparting their unique perspectives and voices that reflect their experiences and the societal challenges they face. Historically, female authors encountered significant barriers in the literary world, often having to navigate a male-dominated landscape that undervalued their work. Despite these challenges, many women writers have used the short story to explore themes of identity, gender and social issues. The stories of the women writers often capture the complexities of women's lives, making the short story a powerful medium for feminist expression.

The form of the short story has proven particularly suitable for women writers as it allows for brevity and focus, enabling them to articulate their thoughts within limited space. Women have played a crucial role in the short story genre, particularly from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Notable figures such as Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman utilised the short story to explore themes of identity, autonomy and societal constraints. Their works often serve as critiques of gender roles and provide insights into the female psyche.

In contemporary literature, women writers continue to innovate with the form of the short story. Authors like Alice Munro and Jhumpa Lahiri have garnered critical acclaim

for their nuanced narratives that delve into complex emotional landscapes and cultural identities. Their stories often reflect a blend of personal and collective experiences, highlighting the intersectionality of gender, culture and class. Women writers have significantly influenced the genre of the short story by bringing unique narratives to light. Their ability to articulate complex emotions and societal critiques through concise storytelling has established them as pivotal figures in literature. As we continue to celebrate their contributions, it becomes essential to elevate their voices within literary discussions and ensure that future audiences appreciate the depth and diversity they offer.

## Keywords

Women and the short story, feminist expression, gender and identity, gender and societal norms

## Discussion

### 4.2.1. Short Story -I: “Seventeen Syllables”

#### 4.2.1.1 Hisaye Yamamoto (1921-2011)

Hisaye Yamamoto is a prominent *nisei* (American-born children of first generation Japanese immigrants) writer. She is renowned for her evocative short stories that reveal the complexities of the Japanese American experiences during and after the Second World War. Yamamoto was born in California to *issei* (first generation immigrants) parents. She often depicted in her works the struggles of *issei* parents and their *nisei* children in navigating cultural divides and generational conflicts.

Yamamoto’s literary career began in her early teenage years. She faced multiple rejections, before achieving fame. Her war-time experiences, especially her imprisonment at Poston, became the central theme of her work. Her incarceration experience not only shaped her identity but also provided a rich backdrop for her stories which often explore themes of identity, resilience and emotional turmoil faced by women in constrained circumstances. Yamamoto’s most renowned work *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories* encapsulates her literary accomplishments spanning four years.

▶ Japanese and American experiences

▶ Work and influences

#### 4.2.1.2 “Seventeen Syllables”

- ▶ Women’s struggles & generational divide

Yamamoto’s “Seventeen Syllables” follows the lives of two Japanese American women, 15-year-old Rosie Hayashi and her mother Tome. Set in rural California before the Second World War, the story explores themes such as the struggles of women, family dynamics and generational and cultural divides.

- ▶ Mrs hayashi and haiku

The story opens with Mrs. Hayashi trying to read a haiku to Rosie, her *nisei* daughter, who could barely comprehend Japanese. Nevertheless, Rosie pretends to understand and appreciate the haiku. Mrs. Hayashi’s fascination with haiku grows, and she becomes a regular contributor to the haiku section of *Mainichi Shimbun*, a Japanese daily newspaper. Her husband’s irritation with her hobby increases day by day. In his opinion, this was an act of transgression against the socially sanctioned boundary set for women. Mrs Hayashi did not neglect her customary household duties. And she also assisted her spouse in the field during the harvesting season. Mrs. Hayashi’s behaviour adhered to societal standards in this regard. However, her poetic ambitions contradicted the conventional social conventions that were prevalent in the immigrant community.

- ▶ Ume Hanazono vs Tome Hayashi

Mrs Hayashi’s poetic endeavours, which were carried out under the pseudonym Ume Hanazono, were perceived as peculiar and difficult. Mr. Hayashi and Rosie experienced a sensation of cohabitation with “two women”—Ume Hanazono and Tome Hayashi. The poetic self of his wife was beyond Mr Hayashi’s control. Consequently, it posed a prospective threat to his authority. The family was tense, and the spouse was filled with a deep sense of uncertainty as a result of his wife’s dual image.

- ▶ Tome’s passion and her husband’s wrath

The husband’s wrath was gradually but steadily intensifying. He begins to exhibit impolite behaviour. On one occasion, Mrs. Hayashi encounters a patient listener in Mr. Hayano, the host, during their visit to the residence of a Japanese American family in the vicinity. Mr. Hayano and Mrs. Hayashi maintained an effortless rapport in terms of their intellectual and artistic pursuits. An angry Mr Hayashi begins to run for the car in a manner that is both abrupt and offensive. Mrs. Hayashi, roused from her poetic reverie, apologises to the hosts for her husband’s abruptness and proceeds to follow him. In the car, she expresses regret for her own preoccupation with the haiku. She obviously feels remorseful. Rosie is angry with her mother for rendering such an apology.

► Rosie's anger

Rosie protests by imagining an act of violence against her family. She desires that the Ford in which they were travelling would crash. She is struck by a mental image of the vehicle, which was “crumpled in the dark” and contained “three contorted, bleeding bodies.” She is imagining a revolt against the gender inequality and injustice by wishing for the family’s annihilation. Rosie’s mother was incapable of experiencing such episodes of rage; however, she resumes her haiku discussions with visitors after a period of time. Rosie observes her father’s irritation. Rosie’s mother fails to acknowledge her husband’s disapproval, causing Rosie to experience an instinctual sense of anger at his irrationality. She experiences a sense of gender affinity with her mother and harbours a sense of distrust towards her father.

► Mr. Hayashi's wrath

Mr. Kuroda, the editor of the haiku section of the newspaper *Mainichi Shimbun*, visits the Hayashis. Haiku once again becomes a topic of discussion. It is the time of active harvesting, and Mr. Hayashi is angry as his wife is spending valuable time discussing poetry. He sends a message urging his wife to return to the field. Mrs Hayashi is so absorbed in her discussion that she fails to go back to the fields on time. Mr. Hayashi marches back to the house in a state of rage. Rosie, who is frightened, watches her father enter the house from a distance. Mr. Kuroda emerges in a hurry and leaves in his car. Mr Hayashi then comes out with the picture of Hiroshinge, which Mrs. Hayashi had won in a haiku competition, smashes it, and eventually burns it.

Mrs. Hayashi's past

Rosie, frantic for her mother, enters the parlour and discovers her there. The two of them watch the dying embers. Mrs. Hayashi maintains extreme composure. She discloses her past to Rosie. Mrs Hyashi informs her that she married Rosie’s father as an alternative to committing suicide; her lover who was from an affluent family jilted her after impregnating her. He was not prepared to cross the class barrier. Tome gives birth to still-born. She became a “picture bride” and ends up with Mr Hayashi. Subsequently, her mother abruptly makes a coercive demand: “Please guarantee that you will never marry.”

► Rosie's romantic relationship

The mother is unaware of Rosie’s romantic awakening. Rosie harbours affection for Jesús Carrasco, a young man from a Mexican family working on her family’s farm. Their relationship blossoms during the summer and culminates in a significant moment when they share a kiss in a shed. This leaves Rosie both thrilled and confused.

### 4.2.1.2 Major Characters

**Tome Hayashi:** Tomie Hayashi is a Japanese immigrant to the US who balances her duties as a housewife and farmworker with her newfound passion for writing haiku. She writes under the pen name Ume Hanazono.

**Rosie Hayashi:** Rosie Hayashi is a second-generation Japanese American teenager. She grapples with her identity and cultural disconnection from her parents.

**Mr. Hayashi:** Mr Hayashi's first name is not given. He is referred to as Rosie's father by his wife suggesting an absence of intimacy between the couple. Mr Hayashi is a traditional Japanese immigrant farmer who is increasingly frustrated by his wife's dedication to poetry. This leads to conflict within the family as he fails to appreciate her artistic expression.

**Jesus Carrasco:** Jesus is a Mexican American teenager who works on the Hayashi farm. He develops a close friendship and romantic interest in Rosie, providing her with a glimpse of love and connection outside her family.

**Aunt Taka:** Aunt Taka serves as a supportive figure in Tome's life, having arranged Tome's marriage to Mr. Hayashi to save her from a life of shame in Japan. She embodies the complexities of familial duty and sacrifice within the Japanese cultural context.

**The Hayanos:** The Hayano family consists of Mr. and Mrs. Hayano and their four daughters—Haru, Natsu, Aki, and Fuyu—each named after a season. Mrs Hayano suffers from ill health and grievous physical discomfort as a result of the complications she suffered during childbirth. Her demeanour can be contrasted with that of Mr Hayano's robust appearance and shared passion for haiku with Mrs. Hayashi.

### 4.2.1.3 Major Themes

#### *1. Artistic Expression and Suppression of Women's Self-Expression*

Mrs Hayashi's passion for writing haiku serves as an important avenue for self-expression amidst the constraints imposed on her by her marriage and societal expectations. Her creative pursuits become a source of tension within the family, particularly with her husband, who disapproves of her artistic endeavours. This theme underscores the broader issue of women's suppression in both personal and cultural contexts,

as Mrs Hyashi's attempts to assert her identity through poetry are stifled by familial obligations and patriarchal norms. One can find echoes of this theme in Chandrika Balan's "The Story of a Poem".

## ***2. Silence and Communication Barriers***

The motif of silence pervades the story. The silence represents both emotional barriers as well as the struggles of women trying to find their voice. Tome's efforts to communicate her artistic aspirations to Rosie are met with misunderstanding; likewise Rosie too grapples with expressing her feelings to both her mother and Jesus. The theme emphasises how silence can inhibit genuine connection and understanding within familial relationships, ultimately portraying the difficulties faced by individuals seeking to articulate their identities in a world that often tends to marginalise their voices.

## ***3. Cultural Disconnection and Identity***

The story illustrates the cultural disconnection experienced by Rosie Hayashi, a second-generation Japanese American girl, and her mother, Tome Hayashi. Rosie struggles to fully grasp her mother's Japanese heritage and language, leading to a significant communication gap between them. The story highlights the challenges faced by children of immigrants who navigate dual cultural identities of feeling alienated from their traditions and beliefs of their parents while simultaneously grappling with their own American upbringing.

### **4.2.1.4 Significance of the Title**

The title "Seventeen Syllables" has considerable significance in the context of the story, mirroring thematic as well as cultural relevance. The title is a direct reference to the traditional Japanese haiku form, which consists of three lines with a syllable pattern of 5-7-5, totaling seventeen syllables. This connection is crucial as it symbolises the struggles of the characters to express their emotions and experiences through the constraints of language and cultural expectations. The structure of the haiku, with its emphasis on brevity and depth, also reflects the challenges one encounters while trying to convey complex feelings within a confined or well-defined medium. The number seventeen is also significant as Mrs Hayashi's stillborn child would have been 17 had she been alive.

- ▶ Experiencing sense of guilt

- ▶ Hatred for patriarchal norms

- ▶ Materialistic farmer

- ▶ Subplot

- ▶ Writer and activist

#### 4.2.1.5 Critical Analysis

When women forsake their traditional duties to pursue their careers or passions, they often experience a deep sense of guilt. Society generally does not support this additional role beyond the domestic sphere. Women are made to feel ashamed for transgressing their limits; and they are made to, consciously or unconsciously, accept and internalise social sanctions.

In an overwhelmingly patriarchal environment, Mrs. Hayashi acquiesces to the suppression of self-expression as customary. However, her daughter Rosie, who belongs to the next generation, reacts emotionally to Mrs. Hayashi's submission. Rosie harbours deep animosity towards both her parents—she resents her mother for pleading and apologising for discussing poetry with a common friend and her father for rejecting her mother's pleas. Her hatred for patriarchal norms is so strong that she even wishes that the car that she is travelling in meets with an accident and kills the family.

In a family of incompatibles, the clash between the emotional imperative for lyrical and artistic expression and the material requirement of harvesting is unavoidable. The materialist farmer cannot understand his wife's passion for composing haiku. He regards it as an infringement on his entitlement to his wife. Thus, he utilises his patriarchal authority to obstruct her poetic pursuits. Rosie recognises that her mother's gender-specific experiences in Japan and the tight-knit immigrant society in America are not separate incidents unrelated to her own life.

The subplot of the story, Rosie's romantic experience, signifies a crucial juncture in her progression from childhood to adolescence. The narrative interlinks the stories of Jesus Carrasco and foreshadows a further sexual and marital storyline.

#### 4.2.2 Short Story -II: "The Divorce"

##### 4.2.2.1 Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016)

Mahasweta Devi is a writer and activist from Bengal. Her activism was not limited to her writing, she was fully committed to a number of grassroots level social movements which addressed issues like forced labour, feudalism, state negligence, subjugation of women, particularly tribal women and forced acquisition of agricultural land. Mahasweta Devi has received a number of prestigious awards for her contributions to literature and social activism, including the Sahitya

Akademi Award (1979), Jnanpith Award (1996), Ramon Magsaysay Award (1997), Padma Shri (1986) and Padma Vibhushan (2006).

Mahasweta Devi primarily wrote in Bengali and most of her works were translated into English by the renowned postcolonial theorist and translator Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Mahasweta Devi has to her credit an extensive body of work which includes over a hundred novels, plays and short stories. Some of her most influential works are *Mother of 1084 (Hajar Churashir Maa)*, *Aranyer Adhikar*; the *Breast Stories*, 'Rudali' and 'Draupadi'. A majority of her stories are based on contemporary social and political realities.

► Major works and themes

#### 4.2.2.2 Discussion

“The Divorce” (Talaq) is one of the five stories of the collection *Till Death Do Us Part*. The story explores gender dynamics and gender roles in marriages. It critiques the institution of marriage as a site of love and violence and reveals the deep-seated inequalities present even in intimate relationships.

► Happy Kuli and Arshad

“The Divorce” centres on Kulsum (Kuli) and her husband Arshad. Immediately after her marriage Kuli asks her father as to why he chose Arshad for he had nor property or any significant wealth. Soon Kulsum realises that Arshad is an even tempered and hardworking man who knows how to live in peace. With the money given by Kuli’s father, the couple raise poultry. Arshad works hard and hands over the entire earnings to his wife. Kuli may not have be as well of as her sisters, but she leads a peaceful life.

► Marriage and societal expectations

Kuli’s and Arshad’s son finishes school and secures a job with a shipping company. Kuli saves the money her son sends her, inside a brass container buried underground. She intends to build a new house with this money. However, all her aspirations are abruptly shattered.

► Kuli’s dreams

Kuli and Arshad fall out when their grandson becomes unwell. Kuli wants the little child to be treated by a local doctor, whereas Arshad wants to take the child to a doctor in the city. The two of them engage in a fierce debate and keep arguing. Blinded with rage Arshad utters ‘talaq’ thrice, in the presence of his neighbours. Upon hearing this, Kuli falls unconscious. Kuli is filled with a sense of wounded pride when she regains her consciousness.

► Kuli and divorce

- ▶ Kuli and her elder sister

Kuli takes her jewellery and the money she had saved and goes to her elder sister Phuli's house. Phuli who had been envious of Kuli's marital bliss is happy about her sister's predicament. She comments that Kuli's fate is the result of some terrible sin she had unknowingly committed. Kuli is furious with this observation. She leaves Phuli's house and goes to her younger sister Duli's house.

- ▶ Reunion beyond societal norms

Duli asks Kuli to build a house nearby. Soon, Kuli's son arrives and asks his mother to go back to his father. He informs her that Arshad is totally shattered: Arshad does not eat anything and keeps crying over his action. Kuli feels a strange sense of joy but all the same she is not averse to joining Arshad. However religious rules do not permit her to go back to her husband. In order to remarry her former husband, Kuli has to get married to another man and seek divorce from him. Family elders suggest that she get married to Irfan Mondal, who is willing to divorce her in a few days. After this she would be free to marry Arshad again. Kuli is furious at this proposal and does not agree to it. When Kuli comes to know that Arshad has sold the house and property, she goes there to fetch her belongings. Kuli realises that Arshad regrets divorcing her. They decide to go to Calcutta and live there. They know that their actions will be criticised by their family and their neighbours, but they are not concerned about it.

#### 4.2.2.3 Major Characters

**Kulsum (Kuli):** Kuli is the protagonist who faces an unexpected divorce from her husband, Arshad. Her journey reflects her struggle against societal expectations and her quest for independence.

**Arshad:** Kuli's husband, whose impulsive decision to divorce Kuli leads to significant turmoil in their lives. His character represents the patriarchal norms that govern relationships.

**Phuli:** Kuli's elder sister, who embodies traditional views and is more concerned about societal perceptions than her sister's emotional well-being.

**Duli:** Kuli's younger sister, who offers Kuli shelter but also reflects the limitations imposed on women in their society.

**Gonu:** Kuli's father

#### 4.2.2.4 Major Themes

##### 1. *Gender Discrimination and Patriarchy*

One of the central themes of “The Divorce” is gender discrimination, particularly how patriarchal structures dictate the lives of women. The protagonist, Kulsum(Kuli) experiences a sudden upheaval in her life when her husband, Arshad divorces her during a heated argument. This act not only threatens their 35-year marriage but also highlights the precarious position of women within a patriarchal society where a single word can dismantle years of companionship and love. Kuli’s subsequent journey to seek refuge with her sisters reveals the emotional isolation and lack of support that women often face, as her sisters are more concerned with material wealth than emotional bonds. The story also underscores the larger social issue where the identities of women are often defined by their relationships with men, leaving them vulnerable to the whims of patriarchal authority.

##### 2. *Identity and Self-Realisation*

Another significant theme of “The Divorce” is identity, particularly how it is shaped and reshaped through personal crises. After Arshad’s declaration of divorce, Kuli grapples with her identity as a wife and as an individual. Initially devastated, she begins to assert her independence by leaving her marital home and contemplating a new life. This shift illustrates her gradual realisation that she can exist beyond the confines of her marriage. The struggle for self-identity is further complicated by societal expectations. Kulsum faces pressure to remarry to regain legitimacy in the eyes of society. However, she ultimately chooses to prioritise her autonomy over societal approval.

##### 3. *Love and Emotional Resilience*

The theme of love—both its complexities and its resilience—permeates “The Divorce”. Despite their separation, both Kuli and Arshad come to recognise their enduring affection for one another. The story illustrates that love can persist even amid conflict and societal pressures. Their eventual decision to reunite underscores that true companionship transcends societal norms and expectations. This emotional resilience highlights the transformative power of love, suggesting that it can provide strength in times of adversity. Devi’s portrayal of their relationship challenges conventional notions of marriage by emphasising emotional connection over social conformity.

► Societal norms

► Societal pressures

► Early life and influences

► Literary journey and influences

#### 4.2.2.5 Critical Analysis

“The Divorce” examines gender inequality, patriarchy and the emotional turmoil experienced by women in traditional societies. The narrative centers on Kuli, a woman who faces an unexpected divorce from her husband, Arshad, after 35 years of marriage. This event serves as a critical commentary on the societal norms surrounding marriage and divorce.

The suddenness with which Arshad decides to divorce Kuli underscores the precariousness of women’s positions in marital relationships. Here, it is a single emotional outburst that irrevocably alters their lives. Following the divorce, Kuli experiences a mix of despair and new-found independence. Initially overwhelmed by her husband’s actions, she decides to leave and stay with her elder sister Phuli. The societal pressures she faces are evident as her family suggests that she must remarry to return to Arshad, highlighting the oppressive expectations placed on women regarding marriage and their identities. Kuli’s refusal to conform to these norms illustrates her strength and desire for self-determination.

#### 4.2.3 Short Story -III: “The Doll’s House”

##### 4.2.3.1 Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923)

Katherine Mansfield is one of the pioneering practitioners of the short story. She was born in New Zealand and educated in New Zealand and England. A pivotal figure in the evolution of modernist literature, Mansfield is known for her innovative narrative techniques, her engagement with the complexity of human emotions as well as the psychological depth of her characters. Mansfield’s exposure to writers like Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons and Anton Chekhov had a significant impact on her development as a modernist writer.

Mansfield’s literary journey began in her youth. She moved to England at the age of 19 and pursued a career as a writer. Her early work is distinguished by a sardonic perspective on societal norms and sharp observational wit. The death of Mansfield’s brother, Leslie, in the First World War had a significant impact on her creative output. The tragic event served as an impetus to delve more deeply into the themes of memory and loss, which ultimately resulted in the publication of her highly regarded collections such as *Bliss and Other Stories* (1920) and *The Garden Party and Other Stories* (1922). These works are examples of Mansfield’s ability to condense intricate emotional experiences into succinct narratives that

deal with universal themes. Mansfield's stories mostly focus on man-woman relationship as well as the relationship of children with one another and with elders.

- ▶ “The Doll’s House” and its intricate features

Katherine Mansfield's “The Doll’s House” is a poignant examination of childhood innocence and social class. Set against the backdrop of early 20<sup>th</sup> century New Zealand, the story revolves around the Burnell sisters: Isabel, Lottie and Kezia (These sisters also appear in the stories “Prelude” and “At the Bay”). The story opens with the arrival of the doll’s house. The doll’s house is a gift to the children of the Burnell family by Mrs Hay. It is green in colour, has two chimneys, a door, four windows and a front porch. Its interior features delicately decorated rooms with papered walls, carpeted floors and cushioned chairs. Notably, in the dining room, the doll’s house features a small amber lamp with a white globe. This lamp captivates Kezia, the youngest Burnell sister. The Burnell sisters are overjoyed.

- ▶ Isabel’s authoritative behaviour

The Burnell sisters are excited to share the news of the arrival of the doll’s house with their friends. Isabel, the eldest sister, wants to be the first to speak about the doll’s house to the friends. She is also going to be the first to decide who among their friends is going to come and see the doll’s house first. Their mother had permitted the Burnell sisters to bring two friends at a time to come quietly and take a look at the doll’s house while it stood in the courtyard.

- ▶ The ostracised Kelveys

At school, the Burnell sisters immediately attract attention as they flaunt their new possession. Nevertheless, two children, Else and Lil Kelvey, children of an impoverished washerwoman and a father allegedly in prison, remain on the periphery. The Kelveys are ostracised by their schoolmates because of their inferior socio-economic status. This seclusion is apparent as they can only observe and listen from a distance Isabel’s descriptions of the magnificence of the doll’s house. All the other children are eager to visit the residence of the Burnells; the Burnell sisters are however explicitly prohibited from inviting the Kelveys.

- ▶ Kezia’s invitation

The Kelvey sisters are mocked and cruelly taunted by their peers for their low socio-economic standing. Everyone, but for the Kelvey sisters, has seen the doll’s house. One evening, Kezia sees the Kelveys walking past her house. In a moment of innocent rebellion, Kezia invites the Kelveys despite knowing that her mother will be furious. Lil resists initially but is persuaded by Else’s eagerness to see the doll’s house.

Aunt Beryl discovers Lil and Else in the courtyard. She scolds Kezia and chases the Kelvey sisters away. Lil and Else sit calmly by the roadside after being shooed away. Else expresses her contentment in having seen the lamp.

#### 4.2.3.2 Characters

**Isabel Burnell:** The bossy eldest sister who revels in her family's wealth and uses it to assert power over her siblings and peers.

**Kezia Burnell:** The youngest sister, is empathetic and curious. She is particularly drawn to the lamp in the doll's house. She challenges societal norms by inviting the Kelveys to view the doll's house.

**Lil Kelvey:** The older of the two Kelvey sisters, endures social ridicule but remains protective of her younger sister Else.

**Else Kelvey:** The younger Kelvey sister, is shy and quiet. She often hides behind Lil for comfort.

**Aunt Beryl:** The aunt of the Burnell sisters, embodies class prejudice and cruelty. She scolds the Kelveys for intruding on the Burnell family's space.

**Lena Logan:** A prejudiced and spiteful classmate of the Kelveys and Burnells. She taunts Lis and Else for the social and family background.

#### 4.2.3.3 Major Themes

##### 1. *Class Prejudice*

A central theme in "The Doll's House" is the stark contrast between social classes. This contrast is illustrated through the interactions between the wealthy Burnell family and the impoverished Kelvey sisters. The Burnells, representing the social elite, exhibit a sense of superiority that leads to the exclusion of the Kelveys from their social circle. This discrimination is not merely personal; it reflects a broader societal prejudice that is ingrained and perpetuated across generations. The story reveals how children mimic the biases of their parents and demonstrate that class distinctions are learned behaviours.

## 2. *Inherited Prejudice*

Mansfield explores the theme of inherited prejudice and emphasises how discriminatory attitudes are passed down from one generation to the next. The Burnell children are influenced by their parents' disdain for lower social classes. They internalise these prejudices, which in turn dictate their interactions with the Kelveys. This cycle of prejudice highlights the difficulty of breaking free from societal norms. The story also suggests that such biases can lead to a lifetime of exclusion and shame for those deemed inferior.

## 3. *Innocence and Generosity*

Mansfield juxtaposes the innocence of childhood with the acquired cruelty of the world of adults. Kezia Burnell, the youngest sister, represents innocence and compassion. Unlike her siblings, she questions the exclusion of the Kelveys and eventually invites them to see the doll's house. This act of defiance against her family's social norms underscores a theme of innate kindness that challenges societal expectations. Mansfield portrays Kezia's gesture as a moment of genuine connection, (although temporary), between children from vastly different backgrounds.

### 4.2.3.4 Critical Analysis

Katherine Mansfield's short story "The Doll's House" explores themes of class consciousness, innocence and social exclusion through the experiences of the Burnell sisters and their interactions with the Kelveys. The doll's house is a gift from an affluent guest that enhances the social status of the Burnell sisters among their peers at school. It reinforces their sense of superiority over less fortunate families, particularly the Kelveys, who are ostracised by the rest of the school because of their lower socio-economic status. Mrs Burnell actively fosters this elitism by permitting only a limited number of children to take a look at the doll's house. Even the friends who are permitted to view the doll's house are not invited to tea. They must examine the doll's house kept in the courtyard quietly and leave quickly. The Burnells establish an exclusive environment that underscores their social privilege.

The physical characteristics of the doll's house also reflect the imperfections of the social position of the Burnells. The dark, oily, spinach green paint with which the doll's house is painted and its strong smell symbolise not only wealth of the

► Class consciousness, innocence and social exclusion

► Symbolic dolls

Burnells but also their moral shortcomings. It suggests that despite their privileged status, they are still flawed individuals. The father and mother dolls in the doll's house look as though they had fainted and their little children are asleep. They do not appear to belong to the doll house. The doll's house is a symbol of family life in middle class society. The immobility and stiffness of the dolls indicate a lack of life, vigour, vitality and goodness. The dolls stand for the contempt and prejudice of the middle class towards the impoverished. The doll's house becomes a "house within a house", mirroring the societal barriers that separate classes and reinforces the theme of exclusion based on social distinctions. While the elder sisters are attracted to the opulent features of the house, Kezia the youngest, derives particular joy in a simple lamp. The lamp represents her innocence and appreciation for authenticity over superficiality.

► Elitism and social hierarchies

The author skillfully demonstrates the elitism and social hierarchies present in society by detailing how the Kelvey sisters are treated by those around them. Even the teacher has a "special voice" and a condescending smile for the Kelveys (Mansfield 2). The teacher's behavior mirrors broader societal prejudices, as she follows the lead of the Burnells and other upper class parents, who explicitly instruct their children not to associate with the Kelveys. The Kelvey sisters are also frequently subject to public ridicule and derision. For instance, Lena Logan openly asks Lil if she plans to be a servant when she grows up. Lil gives her "silly shamefaced smile". Such comments which are intended to humiliate the Kelvey sisters further highlight the perceived inferiority of Lil and Else.

► Kezia's perspective

When compared to the other adults and children, Kezia represents a more open-minded and inclusive perspective. She is captivated by the lamp, which stands for light and clarity. Kezia's fascination for the lamp reflects her sense of fairness and correctness. Kezia's decision to invite the Kelveys to see the doll's house emerges as an act of resistance to societal norms that encourage prejudice. The invitation is crucial as it signifies a character's desire to connect across class divides.

► Moment of inclusion

Permitting Lil and Else to take a look at the doll's house is a fleeting instance of inclusion. This moment of inclusion is interrupted by Aunt Beryl's interference. Aunt Beryl seeks to reinforce societal norms. Aunt Beryl shooing away the Kelvey sisters as if they were little chickens underscores society's harsh treatment of the less privileged. Else's "rare

smile” and her comment “I seen the lamp”, reveals her joy in feeling included (Mansfield 6)

► Kindness and cruelty

“The Doll’s House” presents a complex interplay between kindness and societal cruelty. Even as Kezia’s act of kindness offers hope for friendships that transcend class distinctions, Aunt Beryl’s reaction serves as a grim reminder of entrenched social hierarchies that govern human behaviour. The story prompts the readers to reflect critically on how social norms stifle genuine human relations and perpetuate cycles of exclusion. It is critical of adult snobbery and celebrates meaningful and empathetic human relationships that transcend social barriers.

## Summarised Overview

“Seventeen Syllables”, explores the complex relationship between Rosie Hayashi, a Japanese-American teenager, and her mother, Tome Hayashi, who finds solace in writing haiku poetry. The narrative captures intergenerational and cultural tensions between Rosie and her mother, particularly as Rosie navigates her budding romance with a Mexican-American boy. The story culminates in a poignant moment where Tome reveals her struggles and implores Rosie not to get married, reflecting the burdens of their shared heritage and societal expectations placed on women.

“The Divorce” explores the tumultuous relationship between Kulsum and Arshad. The couple face an unexpected crisis when Arshad, in a fit of anger, divorces his wife leading to their immediate separation. This act highlights the harsh realities of patriarchal norms and divorce laws. Kulsum initially feels abandoned and is compelled to seek refuge with her sisters who are indifferent to her plight. Ultimately, the story critiques societal expectations and emphasises Kulsum’s resilience as she navigates the complexities of love, identity, and the struggle for agency in a restrictive patriarchal environment.

“The Doll’s House” is a powerful commentary on class disparity and childhood innocence. Mansfield illustrates how societal norms shape relationships among children while also revealing how empathy can challenge these social constructs. Through Kezia’s actions and Aunt Beryl’s response, Mansfield critiques not only social hierarchies but also highlights the often harsh realities faced by those on society’s margins. The story leaves readers reflecting on the implications of privilege and exclusion in both childhood and adulthood.

## Assignments

1. Analyse the character of Rosie. In what ways does her struggle with cultural identity reflect the experiences of immigrant families in America?
2. Evaluate the theme of family violence as presented in the story “Seventeen Syllables.” What does the act of Rosie’s husband burning her Hiroshige print symbolize about gender roles and power dynamics within their marriage?
3. Examine the relationship between Rosie and her mother. How does their dynamic illustrate the generational clash between traditional Japanese values and American culture?
4. Reflect on the impact of societal expectations on women as depicted in Yamamoto’s story “Seventeen Syllables”. How do these expectations shape the choices made by Rosie and her mother?
5. Discuss how “The Divorce” serves as a critique of societal norms regarding marriage and divorce. What message does the story try to convey about traditional gender roles?
6. Reflect on how the story of Kuli resonates with contemporary issues faced by women in society today. In what ways do you see parallels between Kuli’s experiences and modern-day struggles for gender equality?
7. Discuss the character of Kuli in Mahasweta Devi’s “The Divorce”. How does her relationship with Arshad reflect the themes of gender and power dynamics within the story?
8. In what ways does “The Doll’s House” serve as a critique of societal norms regarding class? Discuss how its themes are relevant both in the story’s context and in contemporary times.
9. What role does the doll’s house play in illustrating the class differences among the children? Discuss how the Burnell sisters’ ownership of the doll’s house reflects their social status.
10. Analyse the development of Kezia’s character throughout the story with special reference on her perspective on social class and friendship.
11. Discuss the impact of parental influence on the children’s attitude to the less privileged with reference to the story “The Doll’s House”.
12. Examine how Mansfield uses imagery to convey feelings of exclusion and belonging in “The Doll’s House”. What specific images stand out, and what do they reveal about societal norms?

## Suggested Reading

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## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU

## Unit 3

# Drama

### Learning Outcomes

Upon the completion of the unit, the learners will be able to:

- ▶ have a background knowledge of the historical, social and cultural contexts that influenced the development of women's drama
- ▶ identify key themes, motifs and literary devices used by women playwrights to explore the experiences of women
- ▶ evaluate the contributions of women playwrights to the development of modern drama, including their innovations in form, style and subject matter
- ▶ critique the ways in which women's drama challenges or reinforces societal norms and expectations around gender roles

### Background

In England, drama had its origins in religion, as in Greece and many other countries. It emerged from church service just as ancient Greek tragedy had sprung out of the ceremonial worship of Dionysius. In the ninth century, tropes emerged in religious music, occasionally taking the shape of a dialogue. Subsequently, the miracle and mystery plays emerged, leading to the development of interludes, which in turn gave birth to the conventional drama of the Elizabethan era.

Women were not allowed to perform on the stage in miracles or moralities. They were formally barred from participating in theatre and other similar artistic endeavours, including religious music. Appearing on stage was seen as sinful for women. However, there were a limited number of cases where women participated in folk drama and were engaged in Commedia dell'Arte family troupes during the Renaissance.

Upon the restoration of Charles II to the English throne in 1660, a significant change he implemented was the reopening of the theatre. He was influenced by his observations of the French court of Louis XIV, which led him to permit the inclusion of women in theatrical performances for the first time. This was one of the most significant and

revolutionary advancements of the Restoration era, expanding the realm of theatre to include not just actors but also women in managerial and creative roles. However, women were still compensated with a lower salary compared to their male counterparts. Female playwrights like Aphra Ben, Mary Pix, Catharine Trotter, Susanna Centlivre and Delarivier Manley emerged.

These playwrights often focused on themes of love, marriage and social class, which resonated with the growing middle class.

The 19th and 20th centuries saw a significant increase in the number of women involved in theatre. Women dramatists from across the world used the theatre as a medium to artistically express their political views. Women have authored and continue to write a wide range of dramatic works encompassing various styles and forms, including domestic drama, social realism, feminist problem plays, comedy, tragedy and farce. These plays address a diverse array of topics like gender inequality, violence, sexual exploitation and the challenges faced by women and other marginalised communities in their quest for survival.

## Keywords

Women and the theatre, Women and the British Stage, Female characters and actors, Feminist Theatre

## Discussion

### 4.3.1 Drama - I: *Top Girls*

#### 4.3.1.1 Caryl Churchill (b.1938)

Caryl Churchill, the first female playwright to hold the position of Resident Dramatist at the Royal Court Theatre, began her career in her twenties. Her fascination with the realm of theatre and performance originated during her time at Oxford University. Even before earning her bachelor's degree in literature, she had already made a name for herself as a renowned BBC Radio-Dramatist. Churchill emerged in the theatre industry during a period when the English stage was primarily influenced by the Theatre of the Absurd and the Angry Young Men. Her inaugural play, *Downstairs*, which was broadcast in 1958, was mostly disregarded by critics and

► Early life & work

reviewers. However, her plays, being regularly broadcasted on British Radio, quickly gained her widespread attention and recognition.

Among Churchill's noteworthy creations are *Cloud 9*, *Top Girls*, *Serious Money*, *Far Away* and *A Number*, which have garnered critical acclaim and numerous awards. Churchill's plays frequently incorporate non-naturalistic techniques, such as overlapping speech, flashbacks and surreal aspects. These elements enhance the intricacy and complexity of the plays. Churchill's work has been acclaimed for its capacity to ignite creativity and question established norms, establishing her as one of Britain's foremost writers and pioneers for the modern stage.

► Pioneering dramatist

#### 4.3.1.2 *Top Girls*

Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* is a highly acclaimed play which delves into the apparent achievements and freedom of women while also shedding light on their subjugation within a male-dominated society. The drama challenges the act of women embracing patriarchal values in order to attain success. *Top Girls* can be seen as a critique of the feminist movement, specifically targeting liberal or bourgeois feminism and its ideas and values. The play was first performed in 1982 when Margaret Thatcher was the Prime Minister of England.

► Critique of liberal feminism

Churchill's socialist viewpoint challenged the bourgeois feminist ideology that promotes individual achievement at the expense of sisterhood and women's unity. The ambitious women, motivated by their materialistic aspirations and desire for success, frequently disregard or even take advantage of their less fortunate counterparts. The play portrays and emphasises the contrast and division within the feminist movement.

► Sisterhood and bourgeois feminism

The opening scene of the play shows a celebratory dinner at a restaurant for Marlene, who has just been promoted to the position of managing director of the employment agency she works for in London. The guests are the explorer Isabella Bird, former courtesan Lady Nijo, Dull Gret, the subject of Pieter Brueghel the Elder's painting, Patient Griselda from European folklore and the fabled female pontiff Pope Joan. Each of the five characters reveals the adversities and struggles that they have endured in their lives because of patriarchal oppression. They engage in a lively discussion that is characterised by both humour and pain as they converse on motherhood, ambition and violence inflicted on women.

► Women's struggles

► Family vs career

The second scene shifts to Top Girls, the employment agency Marlene works for. The focus shifts to Marlene's professional life. Marlene interviews a young woman named Jeanine, and she is seen to be dismissive of Jeanine's desire to get married and eventually have children. This brief scene illustrates how hard it is for women to get along in the fiercely competitive economic environment.

► Women, family and friendship

Act One, Scene Three takes place in Joyce's backyard. Angie and Kit share a peculiar relationship wherein they constantly engage in challenging and teasing each other. Angie and Kit decide to go to the movies, but Angie's mother, Joyce, insists that Angie can leave only after she tidies her room. Angie tells Kit that she wants to kill Joyce because she is very strict. In addition, she discloses her intuitive belief that Joyce is her aunt and that her real mother is her aunt Marlene, who is employed in London. Joyce, on her part, worries about Angie's future. This scene is significant because it introduces one to the complex dynamics of a woman's relationship with her family and other women.

► Work dynamics and Gender

Act Two, Scene One, again shifts to Top Girls employment agency. Win and Nell discuss work, colleagues and marriage. They interviewed Louise, who seems to be taken for granted by the firm for which she works. Angie comes to Marlene's office. While they are engaged in a conversation, Mrs Kidd comes in and tells Marlene that her husband Howard is ill. Howard had believed that he would be offered the role Marlene was promoted to. He cannot imagine working under a woman. Mrs Kidd wonders whether Marlene can be away for some time so that Howard can have her place. Marlene does not entertain the request. This scene depicts the exclusively materialistic and goal-driven atmosphere of an employment agency.

► Women's career and family dynamics

In Act Two, Scene Two, the narrative shifts back to a year earlier. It unfolds in Joyce's kitchen. Marlene gifts Angie beautiful clothes and perfume, much to the latter's delight. The ensuing conversation reveals the strained relationship between Marlene and Joyce. Joyce expresses her displeasure at Marlene for neglecting her family responsibilities and solely focusing on her professional commitments. It is revealed that Angie is Marlene's daughter. The scene ends on a poignant note with Angie, who has had a frightening dream of looking for Joyce. This scene explores themes of family, sacrifice and the rejection of maternal instincts. It delves into the political dynamics between selfishness and selflessness and raises

concerns about the future prospects of abandoned children who may never achieve success.

### 4.3.1.3 Major Characters

Each character in *Top Girls* represents a distinct facet of women's hardships and experiences in a patriarchal society.

**Marlene:** Marlene, the protagonist, is a professionally motivated and ambitious woman. She has succeeded in her career, but this success comes at the expense of her personal relationships and family obligations.

**Joyce:** Joyce, Marlene's sister, represents the working-class perspective and the challenges faced by women who put their families before their careers.

**Angie:** Purported to be Marlene's niece, but Marlene's daughter, Angie is raised by her aunt Joyce. She is an odd and lonely teenager who struggles to form meaningful relationships.

**Isabella Bell:** The 19th-century traveller who travelled extensively around the world. Her experiences and challenges surpass those of an ordinary woman limited to her domestic environment.

**Lady Nijo:** She is a 13th-century Japanese courtesan who later becomes a Buddhist nun. Her story is ironic as she enjoys the luxuries of a courtesan and, at the same time, endures the indignities imposed by the Emperor and the court, including the emotional torment of losing her children.

**Pope Joan:** She is the fabled pontiff who had to disguise as a man to enter academia. Her excellence and merit saw her rise through the ranks of the Catholic Church and her appointment as Pope. However, her secret is revealed when she goes into labour during a papal procession. She is stoned to death. Her fate highlights the consequences women face when they challenge the patriarchal structure.

**Patient Griselda:** She is the obedient wife of a Marquis who puts her through a series of cruel tests. Griselda's story, a popular European folklore, is narrated in *The Clerk's Tale* of *The Canterbury Tales*. Her story resonates with the trials and tribulations women undergo to achieve success and happiness.

**Dull Gret:** She is the subject of Pieter Brueghel, the Elder's painting, where she leads a group of women to hell to fight the devils. Her rebellion is symbolic of the larger struggle against societal constraints placed on women.

### 4.3.1.3 Major Themes

#### 1) *The Role of Radical Feminism*

Caryl Churchill's play *Top Girls* prominently explores the issue of radical feminism. The play offers a critical analysis of the patriarchal society by depicting women who defy conventional gender norms and societal expectations. The characters, including the historical figures (Pope Joan, Isabella Bird, Lady Nijo, Patient Griselda and Dull Gret), are notable personalities who have challenged societal conventions in order to achieve success. The play also emphasises the struggle for women's rights and the imperative for women to support one another in their quest for equality. Marlene, a prosperous businesswoman, embodies the empowerment that women can attain through their own endeavours. The play's depiction of women's experiences and challenges functions as a potent criticism of the societal conventions that have traditionally oppressed women.

#### 2) *The Bond of Sisterhood and Solidarity in Feminism*

The concept of sisterhood is a significant element in *Top Girls*. The play depicts a favourable representation of female camaraderie and unity, specifically in the initial act, as women of diverse backgrounds and eras converge to exchange their narratives and provide mutual assistance. This representation contrasts with the unfavourable portrayal of the connection between Joyce and Marlene, emphasising the intricacies of female relationships. The play also underscores the significance of women supporting one another in attaining their objectives, as exemplified by Marlene's endeavours to aid other women in securing more desirable employment opportunities and Joyce's efforts to help Marlene by taking care of Angie. This theme stresses the importance of feminist solidarity and the necessity for women to assist one another in their efforts to achieve equality.

#### 3) *Analysis of Capitalism and Patriarchy*

*Top Girls* also offers a critique of both the capitalist system and the patriarchal society that promotes gender inequity. The portrayal of Marlene, a character who has attained success in a career predominantly controlled by males, depicts her grappling with the repercussions of her decisions. The play highlights the challenges women encounter in managing their personal and professional lives, particularly in a society that prioritises

men's careers over women's. Angie's character exemplifies the difficulties young women encounter in a society that frequently fails to encourage their ambitions as she struggles with finding her purpose in life. The play's examination of capitalism and patriarchy underscores the necessity for a just society in which women can realise their true potential without being hindered by traditional norms.

#### 4.3.1.4 Dramatic Tropes and Techniques

1. **Non-Linear Structure:** The play's atypical arrangement, which alternates between various time periods and narratives, highlights the interdependence of the individuals and their experiences. This non-linear method also enables the audience to observe the lives of the characters in a fractured and disjointed manner, reflecting the turmoil and disorientation they frequently experience.
2. **Historical and Cultural References:** The play utilises historical and cultural allusions, including the characters of Pope Joan, Isabella Bird and Patient Griselda, to examine the lives of women throughout various historical eras and cultures. These examples also emphasise the continuous difficulties and obstacles that women encounter in their efforts to attain equality and empowerment.
3. **Brechtian Influences:** The play combines Brechtian epic theatrical features, such as a non-linear storyline and a focus on social critique. This technique enables the play to scrutinise the prevailing gender beliefs and the suppressive nature of gender divisions, as well as the influence of Thatcherite politics on feminism.
4. **All-Female Cast:** The employment of a cast consisting solely of women in the play serves to emphasise the gendered aspect of authority and the manner in which women are frequently set against each other in their quest for achievement. This strategy also emphasises the themes of female solidarity and the importance of women supporting and empowering each other.

An in-depth analysis of the play extends one's understanding beyond the surface of a solely feminist drama and offers a discerning evaluation and re-evaluation of the women's movement and its consequences. Churchill's play *Top Girls*

not only highlights the feminist endeavour for personal independence but also exposes its significant constraints, as acknowledged by numerous feminist theorists.

### 4.3.2 Drama-II: *Thirst*

#### 4.3.2.1 Women Playwrights and Indian Theatre

Women playwrights have played a significant role in Indian theatre. Historically, Indian theatre has been dominated by male voices, with women often relegated to the margins. However, the late 20th century witnessed a significant shift as a number of female playwrights emerged. These playwrights challenged traditional norms and explored themes such as identity, gender and social justice in their works. They not only critiqued the patriarchal structures within society but also sought to establish a theatre that presented the lived experiences of women.

► Women and Indian theatre

While women playwrights such as Swarna Kumari Devi, Anurupa Devi, and Bimala Sundari Devi were popular during the colonial era, it was not until the 1970s that a significant number of Indian women writers started actively participating in the production of theatre. Revered dramatists such as Dina Mehta, Manjula Padmanabhan, and Poile Sengupta have made substantial contributions to Indian theatre by producing works that depict the challenges and determination of women in India.

► Prominent women dramatists

#### 4.3.2.2 M. M. Vinodini

Dr M. M. Vinodini is a prominent Telugu author and academic known for her contributions to Dalit literature, especially Dalit feminist literature. Vinodini has written a number of essays, plays, poems and short stories. Many of her works have been translated into English. Vinodini explores the themes of caste, gender discrimination and social justice in her works. Vinodini, through her works, critiques societal norms and the struggles faced by marginalised communities. Some of her notable works include the short stories “The Parable of a Lost Daughter”, “Block”, “Villain’s Suicide” the poem “The Single Pole Hut” and the play *Daham*. Her play *Daham*, which has been translated into English as *Thirst* highlights the disparities faced by the Dalits in a highly stratified society.

► Life & works of the author

- ▶ Caste and oppression

### 4.3.2.3 *Thirst*

Vinodin's *Thirst* is a play that challenges societal norms. *Thirst* advocates for a deep understanding of the complexities surrounding caste and gender dynamics in contemporary India. The play narrates the story of the Mala community (a Dalit community) and the systemic oppression they suffer in a caste-stratified society. The upper castes exploit their wealth and knowledge to dominate and rule over the lower castes. The lack of access to knowledge and wealth restricts the lower classes from challenging the unfair treatment they are subject to. *Thirst* seeks to expose the weak ideological underpinnings that allow the upper caste to impose its authority on the lower caste. It also explores how such claims of superiority can be patiently tackled through reason.

### 4.3.2.4 Summary

#### *Scene 1*

The opening scene takes place in Tata's thatched hut. It opens with Dasu anxiously calling for his mother, Souramma, who has gone to fetch drinking water. An infant's cry rends the air. When Dasu enquires where the child's mother is, he is informed that she has gone to breastfeed the grandson of Pedda Reddy, an upper-caste man. Ganga, the baby's mother has no choice but to leave her little baby unattended and hungry. Ganga's decision underscores the harsh realities faced by the Dalit community, where caste dynamics dictate personal choices.

- ▶ Dalit's struggles

The narrative shifts as Souramma returns home, weeping loudly. Souramma belongs to the Dalit community and members of the Dalit community are forbidden to draw water from the well. Souramma recounts that she had been waiting by the well all day, hoping that one of the upper-caste women would fill her pitcher. None of the women who came to the well bothered to fetch some water for Souramma despite her recurrent pleas. A tired Souramma could not stop herself from tying a rope to the well to collect the water herself. Souramma's act infuriates the upper-caste women. They rush up to Souramma, break her pitcher and begin to beat her up. Dasu flares up as he listens to the injustices faced by Souramma, but Tata, the elder, intervenes and cautions him against challenging the authority of the upper castes.

- ▶ Dalits and social injustice

The opening scene strikes the keynote of the play. It lays the foundation for the play's exploration of caste exploitation

- ▶ Caste exploitation and resistance

and the resilience of the oppressed Dalits. This scene serves as a microcosm of the larger social issues at play: the struggle for dignity, recognition and justice in a deeply stratified society. The scene employs powerful symbols and imagery. Dasu's metaphoric statement " We've nothing to feed the calf in our home, but the tiger in the neighbourhood must be fed !" conveys the absurdity and injustice of their community's reality (Vinodini 492). The needs of the upper caste (represented by the tiger) are always prioritised, whereas those of the lower castes (represented by the cow) are always sidelined or neglected. Souramma's fierce words against her oppressors reveal her initial resistance, positioning her as a symbol of defiance against the caste system.

### *Scene 2*

Scene 2 unfolds outside an open space in front of Souramma's hut. Pedda Mala, an elder from the Dalit community, enters. He asks Souramma whether she knows the seriousness of her actions. Souramma's husband, Narasaiah, and Pedda Mala disapprove of what Souramma did. Narasaiah opines "We are low-caste people. We must remain where we should be." (Vinodini 495). Dasu protests against this subservient attitude and remarks that low-caste people should not live in fear as they are not living under anyone's mercy. Souramma explains why she tied the rope to the well and why she engaged in verbal abuse with the Reddys. Pedda Mala replies that Pedda Reddy will not entertain any of these explanations. Pedda Reddy firmly believes that the lower caste people should not step outside the social boundaries of their caste. The elders Narasaiah and Pedda Mala decide to go meet Peddy Reddy. The scene ends on a symbolic note with Pedda Mala removing the slippers he had put on while going to meet Pedda Reddy.

- ▶ Subservience Vs resistance

This scene further explores the injustice meted out to the Dalit community. Instead of being a shared communal resource, the well is the site of conflict, prejudice and discrimination. The denial of access to water reinforces the marginalised status of the Dalits and highlights the absurdity of the caste system, where even the basic act of survival is determined by social hierarchy. The act of Pedda Mala hastily removing his slippers while going to meet Pedda Reddy carries significant symbolic weight as it reflects compliance and submission.

- ▶ Caste and access to basic resources

### Scene 3

Pedda Reddy makes his first appearance in this scene. He is seated on a chair, attended to by three servants. Pedda Reddy asks one of his servants whether Narasaiah has been informed to come and meet Pedda Reddy. This inquiry sets the tone for the conversation that follows. Narasaiah, Pedda Mala and two others arrive to meet Pedda Reddy. Pedda Reddy maintains an aggressive and dictatorial demeanour. He verbally assaults Narasaiah (and his group) and rebukes Narasaiah for not keeping his wife under control. Pedda Reddy warns the lower castes to remain within their prescribed social boundaries. In order to prevent such acts from the lower castes in the future Pedda Reddy imposes a heavy fine on Narasaiah. If Narasaiah does not pay the fine within a day, Pedda Reddy threatens that Souramma will be paraded naked.

- ▶ Upper caste arrogance

The third scene depicts the caste discrimination and power dynamics within an Indian village. Pedda Reddy accuses the lower caste people of raising their eyes and talking to the upper castes these days. He also opines that the lower caste people are taking undue advantage of the ‘lenient behaviour’ of the upper castes. The interactions between the characters reveal the systemic inequalities that dictate their lives. The punishment meted out to Souramma and her family serves as a grim reminder of the severe consequences of defying caste norms and the brutal realities of life for Dalit communities.

- ▶ Overstepping caste boundaries

### Scene 4

The fourth scene shows a meeting of the Dalit members of the village. Pedda Mala remarks that the Reddys are “crushing us to the depths day by day”. When Dasu asks why they are not protesting against this ill-treatment, the elders reply that any form of protest would invite severe punishment. Chinnenkati and some of the other caste elders narrate an old story. Once, during a severe drought, Pedda Reddy’s father, Subba Reddy, visits the Dalit village in Malapalli and requests the villagers to build a well from which all of them can draw water. The Dalits work hard for days and dig a well. However, the upper castes conspired together, hatching a plan to prevent the Dalit villagers from collecting water from the well. Dasu’s uncle protests against this injustice, and the next morning, he is found dead — hanging from a tree. Rosammavva questions this; she is beaten up and her legs broken by the upper castes. Whenever the villagers talk back to the Reddys, they are

- ▶ Oppression and resistance

reminded of the fate of Dasu's *Chinnayana* and Rosammavu. Dasu, Raju, and some others in the younger generation decide to question the authority of the Reddys. They not only refuse to pay the fine imposed on Souramma but also choose to go to the village assembly the next day and demand a fine from the upper castes for physically assaulting Souramma. Dasu and his friends also decide to inform Pedda Reddy that they will draw water from the well. The elders of the village offer Dasu and his group all their support.

- ▶ Collective denial and assertion of the dalits

This scene is significant because it shows the collective denial and assertion of the villagers to disobey the dictates of the upper caste. Interestingly, the elders, after their initial hesitation, agree to support the fight against the oppression of the upper castes. Dasu's insistence on demanding a fine from the Reddys and his determination to draw water from the well reflects the play's overarching theme of dignity and self-respect.

### *Scene 5*

The final scene takes place under a tree in the centre of the village. The people of the village are gathered for the village assembly. Some people are seated, and some are standing. Pedda Reddy comes in and sits on the chair. Pedda Reddy asks whether the Dalits have brought the fine. Dasu argues that the Reddys have to pay a fine and apologise to Souramma for denying her access to water and for beating her up. The Dalits and the upper castes engage in a heated discussion where the former points out the atrocities and injustices meted out to them by the upper castes. In the tense atmosphere, a woman runs in with a message from Pedda Reddy's wife, asking Souramma's daughter-in-law to come and breastfeed Pedda Reddy's grandchild. The little child has been crying uncontrollably is almost about to turn unconscious. Despite recurrent summons, Ganga refuses to go. Pedda Reddy agrees that the Malas can draw water from the well. Ganga insists that she will feed the baby only after those who assaulted Souramma apologise to her. The women of the Reddy family express their regret for beating up Souramma. Soon after this, Ganga sits down and feeds the baby.

- ▶ Resistance and victory

- ▶ Collective empowerment

This scene ends in a moment of collective empowerment for the Malas. The readers witness an awakening of the Dalit consciousness and a refusal of the Dalits to accept subjugation. Ganga's unwavering determination to ensure that Souramma

receives a public apology is a powerful statement against the injustices experienced by the Dalits.

#### 4.3.2.5 Major Characters

**Souramma:** A central figure representing the resilience of Dalit women.

**Ganga:** Ganga is Souramma's daughter-in-law. She embodies the challenges faced by women in the Dalit community.

**Dasu:** Dasu is Souramma's son. He resists upper-caste exploitation, and the systemic injustice inflicted on his community.

**Raju, Prasad, Chandraiah, Dibbadu:** Young men who speak against the oppression by the upper caste.

**Pedda Mala:** An elder of the Mala community. He is initially submissive but gradually gains strength to speak against the atrocities of the upper castes.

**Pedda Reddy:** A rich, arrogant and influential villager. He belongs to the upper caste.

**Tata**

**Narsaiah (Shouramma's husband)**

**Pushpamma**

**Punamma**

**Chinnenkati**

**Chinna Reddy**

**Venkata Reddy**

#### 4.3.2.5 Major Themes

##### 1) *The Caste System and Untouchability*

A central theme of Vinodini's *Thirst* is untouchability and discrimination based on caste. The play offers a scathing critique of the caste system and of the discrimination faced by the Dalits. It highlights the daily struggles of the members of the Dalit community. Vinodini presents the harsh realities of untouchability, where even basic human rights, such as access to water, are denied to members of certain communities.

## 2) Gender and Intersectionality

The play also addresses the intersection of caste and gender, particularly focusing on the experiences of Dalit women who face dual discrimination. Vinodini portrays the unique challenges that Dalit women encounter. She emphasises the role of Dalit women in both the family and the community as they navigate societal constraints. Ganga is forced to leave her child hungry and feed the baby of the Reddy household. Souramma is not allowed to draw water from the well, and she is expected to wait endlessly for a pot of water.

## 3) Symbolism of Water

Water in Vinodini's *Thirst* symbolises life, sustenance and the fundamental rights that are denied to the Dalits. The struggle for access to water represents the larger fight for justice and equality. The title of the play, in fact, stands for this multifaceted thirst—that is, a thirst not just for water but also for social equity and basic human rights.

Vinodini's *Thirst* is a poignant examination of the social, political and economic factors that impact Dalits in India. It explores themes such as caste-based discrimination, the pursuit of self-respect, and united opposition and resilience in these struggles.

## Summarised Overview

*Top Girls* is a complex and intellectually stimulating play. It delves into the complex challenges that women encounter when striving for professional accomplishment within a male-dominated society. Churchill explores the cost of achievement that women frequently bear as they manage the conflicting pressures of their professional and personal lives. The play's unconventional format, featuring a non-chronological sequence of events and a cast composed entirely of women, aims to make the audience see things in a new and unfamiliar way, challenging traditional gender roles and power dynamics. Churchill examines the limited choices for women and the potential conflict between personal success and feminist unity by contrasting Marlene's professional achievement with the personal sacrifices made by other women.

Vinodini's *Thirst* is a powerful social commentary on the struggles faced by the Dalits, especially Dalit women in a patriarchal society. It urges society to tackle and address the barriers preventing marginalised group members from accessing basic resources and attaining progress.

## Assignments

1. Analyse the significance of the first act of *Top Girls*, where Marlene hosts a dinner party with historical female figures. How does this set the stage for the rest of the play?
2. Discuss the relationship between Marlene and her sister Joyce. How do their contrasting life choices and perspectives reflect the central themes of the play?
3. How does *Top Girls* engage with the political and social climate of 1980s Britain under Thatcherism? Discuss the play's critique of individualism and capitalist values.
4. Compare and contrast the different approaches to feminism represented by the characters in *Top Girls*. How does the play complicate or challenge conventional notions of feminism?
5. Analyse the play's structure and use of non-linear time. How does this formal experimentation contribute to the thematic concerns of the work?
6. How are the central themes of social injustice and caste discrimination depicted in Vinodini's play *Thirst*?
7. How does *Thirst* illustrate the conflict between the upper caste Reddys and the lower caste Dalits regarding access to water? What does this conflict symbolise within the larger context of Indian society?
8. In what ways does *Thirst* serve as a form of protest literature, and how does it reflect the lived experiences of Dalit women in rural India?
9. Discuss the role of collective action as portrayed in *Thirst*. How does the struggle of the characters contribute to a broader understanding of resistance against social hierarchies?

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## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU

# Model Question Paper Set-01

SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

QP CODE : .....

Reg. No : .....

Name : .....

Fourth Semester - Discipline Specific Elective Course

MA English Language and Literature

M21EG06DE- Women's Writing

(CBCS - PG)

2022-23 - Admission Onwards

Time: 3 Hours

Max Marks: 70

## Section A

Answer any *five* of the following questions in one or two sentences each. Each question carries 2 marks. (5×2=10 Marks)

1. Define *écriture féminine* as introduced by Helene Cixous.
2. What does Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck" symbolize?
3. What is the main focus of postcolonial feminist criticism?
4. Who is the central character in *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin?
5. How does Kamala Das critique societal norms in "The Dance of the Eunuchs"?
6. What is the metaphorical significance of water in *The Awakening*?
7. Explain the concept of gynocriticism in feminist literary theory.
8. Who are the major characters in Lalithambika Antharjanam's *Agnisakshi*?

## Section B

Answer any *six* of the following questions in half a page each. Each question carries 5 marks (6×5=30 Marks)

9. Discuss the phases of feminist literary criticism as explained by Elaine Showalter.
10. Explain the theme of self-discovery in Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck."
11. How does Lalithambika Antharjanam's *Agnisakshi* critique traditional gender roles?
12. Analyze the significance of symbolism in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*.
13. Discuss the impact of the postcolonial feminist movement on women's literature.
14. How does Kamala Das' poem "Dance of the Eunuchs" reflect marginalization and freedom?
15. Compare the feminist aesthetics of Adrienne Rich and Kamala Das.
16. Analyze the theme of societal alienation in Lalithambika Antharjanam's works.

17. Discuss the feminist themes present in the four waves of feminism.
18. Explain how Kate Chopin uses local color style to depict Creole society in *The Awakening*.

### Section C

**Answer any two of the following questions in four pages each. Each question carries 15 marks.** (2x15= 30 Marks)

19. Compare and contrast feminist themes in the works of Adrienne Rich and Kamala Das.
20. Critically evaluate the representation of female autonomy in *The Awakening* and *Agnisakshi*.
21. How do postcolonial feminists challenge traditional narratives of gender oppression? Provide examples.
22. Analyze the intersectionality of race, class, and gender in African American feminist writing, using examples from the provided materials.

## Model Question Paper Set-02

SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

QP CODE : .....

Reg. No : .....

Name : .....

Fourth Semester - Discipline-Specific Elective Course

MA English Language and Literature

M21EG06DE- Women's Writing

(CBCS - PG)

2022-23 - Admission Onwards

Time: 3 Hours

Max Marks: 70

### Section A

Answer any *five* of the following questions in one or two sentences each. Each question carries 2 marks. (5×2=10 Marks)

1. What does the term "écriture feminine" mean in feminist literature?
2. Who wrote "The Dance of the Eunuchs," and what is its main theme?
3. Define the concept of intersectionality as applied in feminist literature.
4. What is the central conflict in Lalithambika Antharjanam's *Agnisakshi*?
5. What does the ladder in Adrienne Rich's poem symbolize?
6. What does the character Edna Pontellier represent in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*?
7. Who are the major female figures in postcolonial feminist literature?
8. How does Adrienne Rich depict the struggle for self-identity in her poems?

### Section B

Answer any *six* of the following questions in half a page each. Each question carries 5 marks. (6×5=30 Marks)

9. Compare and contrast the feminist themes in the works of Adrienne Rich and Kamala Das.
10. Discuss the role of societal expectations in shaping female identity in *Agnisakshi*.
11. Analyze the use of imagery in Kamala Das's "Dance of the Eunuchs."
12. Explain the significance of motherhood as portrayed in *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin.
13. How do postcolonial feminists address the intersection of gender and colonialism?
14. Evaluate how Lalithambika Antharjanam uses fiction to critique the conservative values of Namboodiri society.

15. How does *The Awakening* reflect the tensions between personal desire and societal constraints?
16. Explain how the concept of self-fulfilment is depicted in *Agnisakshi*.
17. Discuss the portrayal of marginalised women in Kamala Das's poems.
18. Compare the feminist discourse of the first and third waves of feminism.

### Section C

**Answer any two of the following questions in four pages each. Each question carries 15 marks.** (2×15= 30 Marks)

19. Analyze the representation of women's desires and self-realization in the works of Kate Chopin and Lalithambika Antharjanam.
20. Critically discuss how Adrienne Rich and Kamala Das challenge patriarchal norms through their poetry.
21. Compare the themes of freedom and constraint in *The Awakening* and *Agnisakshi*.
22. Evaluate the impact of the feminist movements in shaping modern women's literature. Provide examples from both the poetry and fiction discussed.

സർവ്വകലാശാലാഗീതം

വിദ്യായാൽ സ്വതന്ത്രരാകണം  
വിശ്വപൗരരായി മാറണം  
ഗ്രഹപ്രസാദമായ് വിളങ്ങണം  
ഗുരുപ്രകാശമേ നയിക്കണേ

കുരിശുട്ടിൽ നിന്നു ഞങ്ങളെ  
സൂര്യവീഥിയിൽ തെളിക്കണം  
സ്നേഹദീപ്തിയായ് വിളങ്ങണം  
നീതിവൈജയന്തി പറണം

ശാസ്ത്രവ്യാപ്തിയെന്നുമേകണം  
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ബോധരശ്മിയിൽ തിളങ്ങുവാൻ  
ജ്ഞാനകേന്ദ്രമേ ജ്വലിക്കണേ

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# Women's Writing

COURSE CODE: M21EG06DE

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