MWG-003: Constructing Gender through Arts & Media
Guess paper-1

Q1. Discuss about the perspectives from literature

Ans. Women writers are often taken less seriously than their male counterparts. Is the difference to do with style, genre or experience? Some textual critics assert that the difference is perceived by the reading experience. The perspectives from which we read can be from the biological, linguistic, psychoanalytical or cultural perspectives. Victorian physicians believed that women's physiological functions divert 20% of their creative energy from brain activity. Victorian anthropologists thought that the frontal lobes of the brain were heavier and better developed in men and so women were less intelligent. Women writers have been compelled to reinvent language so that they can communicate in ways that are not dependent on the dominant discourse and which do not rely overly much on masculine meaning and connotation. Adrienne Rich puts it well when she says that "if the imagination is to transcend and transform experience, it has to question, to challenge, to conceive the alternative, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment. You have to be free to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hating; nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call experimentally by another name. For writing is re-naming" (Rich, 1992, p. 503). Another critic, Mary P. Hiatt says that although 'masculine' and 'feminine' are terms that are ostensibly used to denote the styles of writing (of men and women), what they actually do is illustrate the male perspective of both men and women. She offers examples such as descriptions like "strong," "rational," and "logical" for men, and "emotional," "hysterical," and "silly" for women (Hiatt, 1978, p. 222). So, we can say that the primary goal of feminism in composition studies was to fashion a space where women could view themselves intellectually and where their voices could resonate with meaning. In a patriarchal society, sexual politics often determine what gets written and what is valued in the anthropological canon. Hélène Cixous feels that "it is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded - which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist" (Cixous, 1976, p. 883). Lisa Tuttle defines feminist theory as asking "new questions of old texts." She cites the goals of feminist criticism as: (i) to develop and uncover a female tradition of writing (ii) to interpret symbolism of women's writing so that it will not be lost or ignored by the male point of view (iii) to rediscover old texts (iv) to analyse women writers and their writings from a female perspective (v) to resist sexism in literature (vi) to increase awareness of the sexual politics of language and style (Tuttle, 1986, p. 184). Literature has always had a strong focus on gender issues right from the time of Sappho and Homer who wrote about marriage, relationships between women and their families and female sexuality. Philosophers also discussed the role of women in society, often in disparaging terms. It was during the Victorian era, with the emergence of the notion of women's rights and the publication of more and more women's writing that the contours of literary mindsets as related to women came to be refigured. There were extremes: on one hand was the notion of woman as angel that assigned to her the roles of companion, keeper of the home and hearth and conscience keeper to society. On the other hand was the new woman who, gradually realising that she could have some measure of freedom and a role over and above what had been prescribed so far, demanded that she be given the opportunity to educate herself, to vote, to have a career and to lead a single life if she so wished. This figure was generally looked upon with suspicion, and a blot on 'respectable' society. Both kinds of stereotypes are to be found in Victorian literature and were read and judged according to the prevailing mindset. With the advent of Freud and his concepts of castration anxiety, penis envy etc., literature written by or about women assumed different dimensions (Freud, 1932, p. 281-97). Freudian ideas, though denounced by later feminists as misogynistic and as a reflection of his own insecurities, did however colour Western perceptions of women in literature to a great degree. Literature from Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia and Africa and also African American literature – both by women and about women – while talking about issues

that other writing has dwelt on, also addresses basic issues that directly touch women's lives such as slavery and colonisation. Today, with women's emancipation so clearly established in a number of societies in varying degrees, literature more and more depicts the changing face of women's roles and activities and the still existent barriers on their path to self-actualisation

Q2. Write down about literature in India in brief

Ans. In Saba Vimosanam, a Tamil story, published in 1943, Pudhumaipittan takes up the story of Ahilya from where it is left off in the Ramayana. Once she is free of the curse and has turned back into a woman, she and her husband, the Rishi Gautama take up the reins of their household once again, trying to forget the past and forge new bonds of togetherness with each other. When Rama returns victorious from Lanka, he comes to their ashram, accompanied by Sita who tells Ahilya in a very matter-of-fact manner, about her trial by fire – the agni pariksha. Ahilya is horrified and asks her why she submitted to such a thing to which Sita replies that Rama had asked her to do so. Interestingly enough, Ahilya poses a question to Sita twice: did he ask you to do this? The first time she does so, she uses the respectful honorific (the pronoun prevalent in most Indian languages to denote the third person 'he' when referring to someone elderly or highly respected) for Rama but the second time, after Sita confirms that he did indeed ask her to, Ahilya makes use of the ordinary honorific. Thus, within the space of a sentence, and by just changing the pronoun, the author conveys how Ahilya's respect – bordering on worship - for Rama comes crashing down. She then turns voluntarily back into stone as a protest against the victimisation of women and their humiliation in a patriarchal society. Her gesture is meant to indicate that she'd rather be an inanimate object than a woman inhabiting such a heartless society. Pudhumaipittan thus re tells the myth from another perspective and questions the patriarchal concepts of purity and chastity. In the Hindi poem, Saket, published in 2008, in Granthavali Vol. 4, Maithili Sharan Gupta looks at the sequence of events in the Ramayana from the perspective of Urmila, Lakshmana's wife who is left behind in Ayodhya while Rama, Lakshmana and Sita go away to the forest for fourteen years. In this work (which can be described as a good example of alternate histories), we hear Urmila speaking about what it is like to be in Ayodhya without the three celebrated characters. In the paeans sung in praise of the ideal brother, Lakshmana, where is the song for Urmila? Why is she not celebrated as the ideal wife? Maithili Sharan Gupta's verse is an attempt to bring her into our field of awareness and foreground her point of view. In doing so, he gives voice to someone who has been silenced and perhaps all but forgotten in our collective consciousness. Another poem published in 2008 in Granthavali Vol. 5, by Maithili Sharan Gupta, Sakhi Ve Mujhse Keh Kar to Jaate, is a plaintive statement by Yashodhara, wife of Prince Siddhartha (later Gautama Buddha) of the fact of his having left her and their son without a word while they were sleeping. How shattering must it have been to her when she discovered that her husband had stolen away under the cover of darkness without a word of goodbye to her?! In an era when women were entirely dependent on their husbands and when their very existence was justified only if they had one living, what would this desertion have meant to her? She wonders whether he had thought that she might have stopped him but counters it by saying that women readily prepare and send their men off to war so then why would she have made an exception in this case and tried to stand in the way of his quest for Truth? Gupta's short but touchingly effective poem draws a sketch of Yashodhara as a strong woman who voices her anguish and drives home the point of being a partner in the relationship who, if not consulted, should have been at least told about her husband's decision. The poem highlights the fact that, Gautama Buddha, for all his wisdom and philosophy and enlightenment, if seen from Yashodhara's perspective, was yet a man who simply left his home and went away without telling his wife. The Australian poet, Kate Llewellyn's poem, Penelope, published in 1987, is a witty reply to fellow Australian, AD Hope's The End of the Journey, his own re-telling of the Ulysses myth where he describes the doughty warrior, now returned home, as 'an old man sleeping with his housekeeper'. Penelope, his wife, is an old woman too now and as he looks around his island home, he wonders whether this was what he had resisted the call of the sirens for. But what of Penelope – the epitome of the faithful wife – left behind for years together while her husband-king

roams the farthest corners of the globe, never knowing when he would return or indeed if he would return at all? All our epics abound with descriptions of adventurous gallants and the saga of their journeys; not one makes the attempt to plumb the depths of the emotions of the women left behind. Kate Llewellyn describes the feelings of Penelope during all the years of his absence and then her reactions on his return. In this poem, Penelope is an older woman with a mind of her own, capable of self-analysis and understanding. The point that Llewellyn very clearly and unequivocally makes is that Penelope had remained faithful not out of overwhelming love for her absent husband but because of her reluctance to cross the strict standards (albeit double) set by society in a world in which men have all the rights and women all the duties. It is important to remember – as can be seen by the above illustrations – that such revisions or revisiting of canonical texts or established stories have been done by both men and women and have not been the sole prerogative of women alone. Jane Eyre for instance, was written by a woman and reframed by another as Wide Sargasso Sea while Maithili Sharan Gupta and Pudhumaipitthan (both men) have retold or presented stories and situations from a woman's point of view.

Q3. Discuss about the topic "THE WOMAN WRITER" in brief

Ans. In 1929 Virginia Woolf wrote about the unequal treatment meted out historically to all women and specifically to women writers. In her essay "Shakespeare's Sister" she argues that in great literary works written by men the actual position of women in society is not reflected as almost all memorable women characters – from Cleopatra to Emma Bovary – are persons of extreme personalities and circumstances: "very various; heroic and mean; splendid and sordid; infintely beautiful and hideous in the extreme; as great as a man, some think even greater." (Woolf, 2005, p. 43). To give an idea of the odds actually faced by middle-class women, she envisages a woman writer, Shakespeare's fictional sister, called Judith, who is as gifted as her brother. But of course, Woolf argues scathingly, such a woman would never have been able to write the plays Shakespeare did: The recipe for the woman writer's liberation that Woolf provided in her celebrated essay has become a cliché: a room of one's own and a private income. But this solution may seem too bourgeois to some. As the African American writer Alice Walker pointed out, many women, African American slave women particularly, attempted to write their liberation without even owning their own bodies Besides, many women, especially those not in the Anglo-American mainstream, discovered that finding a place in the literary universe is not a matter of financial autonomy or what is recognised as modernity alone. In their introduction to Women's Writing in India from 600 BC, Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha outline the fascinating story of a collection of poems (Radhika Santwanam or Appeasing Radhika) that was written by a courtesan called Muddupalani in mid eighteenth century. Muddupalani was a well-regarded poet in the Thanjavur period of Telugu literature. But her work that celebrated Radhika's sexuality in a clever subversion of the classical form (where Krishna is the dominant lover and Radhika,only the passive beloved), was all but lost by the beginning of the twentieth century. It was with great difficulty that Nagratnamma – a patron of the arts, musician and distinguished courtesan, herself - was able to excavate the full text and reprint it in 1910. An unexpected furore greeted the publication of the text in colonial India and social reformers attacked it for its explicitness. The British government banned it. It was only in 1947 after the intervention of the Chief Minister that the ban could be lifted, and the text reissued. But once again, Tharu and Lalitha note, Radhika Santwanam faced similar criticism and ostracism on grounds of "obscenity" in independent India. When they tried to locate the full text, several Telugu scholars assured them that their efforts were misplaced as the text had little or no literary merit. Tharu and Lalitha foreground this story as an allegory of women's writing in the country. Radhika Santwanam, in their opinion, remains a transgressive text till date as it focuses on the sexual assertions of a woman. The intellectually evolved Thanjavur court could find place for it but, subsequently in the nineteenth century when the British were imposing Victorian morality on the subject race, or in the national and nationalistic period when the nation was being deified as a woman such writings would be considered suspect if not outright dangerous. It is not only 'tradition' or 'ignorance' that put constraints on women; ironically, notions of nationhood

and social progress may also militate against women's writing. In the light of the above, it is not very surprising that an overwhelming majority of women writers feel censored today. Interviewing writers from several languages in India for the volume The Guarded Tongue: Women's Writing and Censorship in India (2001), the editorial team found that censorship in contemporary India is more covert and indirect than openly repressive. They note in their introduction: "What do women write about? Everything under the sun, is the answer that one hears in chorus. What is it that women can't write about? There is a pause – and one group says (and this is almost unanimous): Religion, Politics and Sex. You then wonder: what is there left to write about?" (Women's WORLD, 2001, p. 3). It would seem that the universe of Indian woman writers is teeming with immense possibilities by way of subject matter and an equal number of difficulties that crop up when they try and actualise these possibilities into literary texts.

Q4. Write short notes on the following topics

1. **Writing gender**
2. **resistance and woman's writings**

Ans. WRITING GENDER

What do we mean by 'writing'? Does it emanate exclusively from the writer? Or is writing the result of a far more complex negotiation that takes place between the writer and her readers – both actual and projected? These questions are important when we discuss the construction of gender via writing as we need to understand how exactly gender norms are perpetrated, challenged or recreated in literature. The term author – with its obvious connotation of authority - is a contested category in the present time. In an influential essay entitled "Death of the Author" published in 1967, the French theorist Roland Barthes argued against limiting the reading of the text to the intentions of the author and made a persuasive case for broadening the focus of creativity to language and readers. Barthes meant to liberate the text from the authority of the Author-God, inviting the reader to 'disentangle' the text in order to create its meaning 'here and now'. It was a revolutionary thought to dislodge the 'Author-God' in the realm of literature. By extension all authoritative 'meaning' ascribed to the text by 'Critics', who performed the priest-like function of mediating between the writer and the readers, could also fall by the wayside, making it possible to reconceptualise writing as a truly secular and democratic activity. However, feminist writers and thinkers, also intent on democraticising literature, had been following a slightly different trajectory from the above. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century they had started to challenge the literary canon for its exclusion of women's voices and their interventions were necessarily premised on the gender identity of writers. Why were all the writers who were considered great – and worthy of being included in the curriculum - male? The answer was sought in the socially disadvantaged position of women writers and the exclusion of women from the benefits of education and other means of broadening the mind like travel. But even more discriminatory was the attitude of critics who were found to overlook the 'greatness' of many women writers. Excavation of forgotten and overlooked women writers became the agenda for feminists at the time. Indeed, many interesting texts were brought to light leading to great enrichment and, arguably, complete transformation of the Western canon. By the sixties and seventies feminist writers started to theorise about the distinguishing characteristics of women's writing. Elaine Showalter's "A Literature of their Own" (1977) is a case in point. Showalter discusses women's writing as a subculture based on female solidarity arising from secretive and ritualised physical experiences. She shows the evolution of women's literature, starting from the Victorian period to modern writing. She breaks down the movement into three stages — the Feminine, a period of imitation, beginning with the use of the male pseudonym in the 1840s, ending with George Eliot's death in 1880; the Feminist, characterised by resistance, that she traces from 1880 till the winning of the vote in 1920; and the Female, one of self-discovery, from 1920 till the present-day, including a "new stage of self-awareness about 1960." Showalter also coined the term 'gynocritics' to suggest "the scholarship concerned with woman as the producer of textual meaning with the history, themes, genres, and structures of literature by women" (Showalter, 1977, p. 244). The concept of écriture

féminine, championed in France by writers and psychoanalysts such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray emerged in the seventies. Hélène Cixous first coined the term in her essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa", where she asserts "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (Cixous, 1975, p. 875). The concept of écriture feminine was bound to the psychoanalytical ideas of femininity. Although it was conceded that some texts written by men could be marked by femininity too, the prevailing idea in Elaine Showalter's words was: "the inscription of the feminine body and female difference in language and text" (Showalter, 1977, p. 249). This concept was criticised for essentialiasing the category women and being overly deterministic about writing. By the 1980s Barthes's hugely popular essay "Death of the Author" had gained an iconic status in the English-speaking world. The line of thinking where the identity of the author was considered inconsequential had been taken up and developed by several other theorists. The shift of authority from the author seemed definitive as far as the new discipline of literary theory – that was revolutionising and transforming literary studies – is concerned. For feminists, too, it had important repercussions. In the words of the feminist critic Toril Moi, "In the 1980s, such theories started to conflict seriously with the interest in women's writing. Feminists who wanted to work on women writers at the same time as they were convinced that Barthes, Derrida and Foucault were right, began to wonder whether it really mattered whether the author was a woman "

RESISTANCE AND WOMAN'S WRITINGS

Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha seem to speak on behalf of all women of colour and in post-colonial situations when they outline their project of identifying women's writing in India from 600BC onwards in terms of its oppositional politics. The major principle for the selection of texts for the volume, they explain, was "What modes of resistance did they fashion? How did they avoid, question, play-off, rewrite, transform, or even undermine the projects set out for them?" (Tharu and Laitha, 1991, p.40). They also make a case for reading these texts for "the gestures of defiance and subversion implicit in them" (Tharu and Laitha, 1991, p. 39). Their efforts, they claim, are directed towards developing an aesthetic that does not lessen discontinuity, dispossession, or marginality but dramatizes and clarifies it (Tharu and Laitha, 1991, p. 39). In this enterprise, although they are inspired by the significant feminist work done in the West - especially the English-speaking world – they are acutely conscious of India's distinct socio-political history and subsequent difference from Western societies. Alice Walker had similarly distanced black women's writing from white feminism in her 1974 essay "In Our Mothers' Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South." Yet, Walker argues from the vantage point of her mother's accomplishment as a gardener of unusual creativity, their spirit was never broken. Black women have been giving expression to their creativity in various ways – quilt-making, gardening, cooking. These 'Artists', Walker claims, are the progenitors of black women's writing; certainly not white male writers who make up the Anglo-American canon. However, Walker makes extensive use of spirituality in her theorisation that, according to some critics, blunts the revolutionary point that she is making about the value of women's work. But it can hardly be denied that Walker's 'Womanism' with its focus on the solidarity of the Black community is a strong alternative to white feminism and greatly subverts conventional ideas about 'Literature' and 'writing', tracing the origin of women's writing to humble homely chores black women performed in contrast with the musty intellection of white male writers. Thus, we see that the element of resistance that in the dominant AngloAmerican Feminist thought has sometimes tended to get supplanted by individualistic 'self-discovery' or a withdrawal into a room of one's own is emphasized in feminisms arising in other contexts. In contemporary India, the championing of the cause of the dispossessed by Arundhati Roy in political essays like "The Greater Common Good" (Roy, 1999) – where she argues against the policies of the state from the point of view of the adivasi dispossessed by the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project in Narmada valley - may be seen as arising out of the feminist impulse of the woman writer to read the dominant discourse of progress against its grain and to inscribe the sociopolitical margins of society into the primary text of literature.

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